

THE EMERGENCE OF “SONSHIP” AND ITS INFLUENCE ON
MODERN PENTECOSTALISM

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the emergence of the teaching of Sonship from the Latter Rain Movement of the late 1940s. The Latter Rain Movement greatly affected Pentecostalism, and in its wake deposited some significant teachings that, despite being resisted by most of mainstream Pentecostalism, still heavily influence much of today's modern Pentecostal theology.

A primary premise of this work is that perhaps the most prevailing and influential teaching that emerged from the Latter Rain Movement is Sonship. It is the author's contention that the seeds of Sonship teaching are resident within the message of many of today's prominent Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries.

This work begins by exploring the beginnings of the Latter Rain Movement and the various controversies it spawned within the ranks of Pentecostalism. An attempt is made to define the term Sonship, and to identify some leading ministries who were instrumental in helping to solidly establish Sonship as within the mainstream of the Pentecostal Movement.

After discussing Sonship's meaning and its early leaders, this work looks at modern mediums such as ministries, movements, music, and technology that are all now influential in helping to not only keep Sonship alive and well, but carrying it around the world.

The last two chapters are devoted to a critique of Sonship and how it will continue to play an important role within the advancement of modern Pentecostal teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The New Order of the Latter Rain succeeded in generating widespread hysteria throughout the Pentecostal denominations in the late 1940s, but by the early 1950s, it had subsided to a minor ripple.¹

Just as the established mainline denominations struggled to comprehend and evaluate the Pentecostal movement at the turn of the 20th century, Pentecostal denominations and organizations experienced their own time of turbulence and struggle in the late 1940s with the onset of the Latter Rain Movement. Many pastors and church leaders struggled to come to grips with the influx of questions and change that this new movement presented. Questions regarding worship style, forms of church polity, and, most importantly, new eschatological viewpoints were three of the issues that needed to be faced. These confrontations served to move many of the Pentecostal denominations and fellowships from a view of cautious tolerance and examination of the Latter Rain Movement to open hostility towards it. Decisions had to be made, and no matter what the questions, the one that constantly demanded an answer was whether to assimilate or reject the flood of new doctrines and spiritual emphases.

Paradigms function well when they continue to adequately answer the questions that arise. Every paradigm is challenged with new views, premises, and questions. Every paradigm eventually is exposed to possible changes or modification. These new challenges and questions invariably create a tension within an existing paradigm, and it will eventually either break away from the reigning paradigm, be assimilated into it, or succeed in creating a collective, new paradigm. The rise of the Latter Rain Movement

¹William W. Menzies, *Anointed to Serve* (Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1971) p. 322.

from within Pentecostalism led to an inevitable result. Churches and fellowships fractured, as many of the ministries who accepted the Latter Rain Movement either branched off from existing Pentecostal organizations or were ostracized and forced to start their own churches and fellowships. For several years this controversial movement made its presence known within Pentecostalism.

Menzies places the early 1950s as the time frame when the Latter Rain Movement began to decline in its popularity and strong influence. However, there emerged from this movement a core of teaching and doctrine that is still alive today, and its influence within the ranks of Pentecostal ministries has gone beyond the “ripple stage” to form enormous waves that are constantly breaking upon the shores of modern day Pentecostalism. In a letter to Richard Riss in February, 1975, Paul Van Elst stressed the impact of the Latter Rain Movement:

I consider it [the Latter Rain Movement] to be one of the most important events in the history of God’s restorative plans. It is the least understood, but has had profound effect on many of the present ministries involved in what God is doing today. The Word of the Lord that came out of that revival continues to reverberate and influence Christians worldwide. It seems like the streams that flowed out from that encounter-Restoration, Sonship, Kingdom Now, Life and Immortality messages-these have remained on the fringes of the mainstream Church. However, many leaders have been profoundly influenced by this revival but have not endorsed it, nor have made explicit reference to it because of the controversies and misunderstandings of what God actually did during those times.²

Though Van Elst’s statement may come as a surprise to some, it is, by no means, an exaggeration. In addition to the doctrinal influences that were left in its wake, the Latter Rain Movement also introduced new styles of worship, music, and the arts that remain

²Dan Clasen, “Last Day’s Leaven: Latter Rain Heresies,” *The Kingdom Gospel Messenger*,” Volume B, No. 4, August 1996.

with us today. These new innovations and challenges were seeds that grew and ultimately produced the explosion that we presently witness in these various expressions, which are not only prevalent within Pentecostalism, but within a large segment of the Body of Christ.

As Van Elst reminds us in his letter, the influence of Latter Rain extends to many ministries and movements down to this present day. Its influence is not only extensive, but diversified. In fact, so many areas of the Pentecostal church have been affected that it would take a voluminous body of work to adequately address its totality. However, this thesis will attempt to focus on one of the major tenets that emerged from the movement, which is the corpus of teaching called Sonship.

Though Menzies and other historians hold to the mid-1950s as the time when the Latter Rain Movement began to subside, that analysis only applies to movements that specifically carried that name. As already stated, elements of it still live under varied names such as the Charismatic Movement, the Word of Faith, and a host of other movements wherein some cross-pollination has taken place. At the center of most of these new waves stands the teaching and emphasis that spring from the Sonship message.

Because the Latter Rain Movement was branded with suspicion and associated with spurious teachings, it is not surprising that Sonship was tagged with many of the same disparaging charges of excessive emotionalism, blatant errors in scriptural interpretation, and possessing an esoteric nature in which a large portion of its teachings seem to be shrouded. Though an argument can be made that some of these criticisms are correct, all too frequently it is portrayed this way because of people operating from a position of ignorance, which generates fear and suspicion. Often, they are quick to judge the entire movement based upon the extreme teachings and practices of some of its more radical

groups and individuals. Church history, whether viewed from a worldwide perspective or from an American viewpoint, has its patterns of “groups within a group” that develop unsound doctrinal positions, or begin to implement and follow bizarre and unscriptural lifestyles and practices. Hence, Sonship, because of its connection with the Latter Rain Movement, is automatically approached with suspicion and apprehension, often misunderstood, and quickly dismissed as erroneous and something to be avoided.

The first section of this thesis will briefly describe the Latter Rain beginnings and the eventual emergence of Sonship teachings. The author will seek to examine some of its main tenets and create an overview of some of the ministries that played crucial roles in the formulation and propagation of its message.

The following section will explore how this body of teaching, influences, and practices continue and, indeed, thrive in much of modern Pentecostalism. Though it is the author’s view that Sonship has left its mark on a vast part of the Body of Christ, this thesis will focus primarily on the Pentecostal segment. There have been significant changes within Pentecostalism over the years in worship, music, and eschatological views in which Sonship was part of the catalyst.

The final part will endeavor to examine how Sonship teachings live on in the voices of many modern-day ministries [who are the heirs of this movement that began over 50 years ago]. An examination will be made as to how this movement has evolved and where it is presently headed. The effort will also be made to close this thesis with an analysis of the beneficial, as well as the detrimental effects, that Sonship has wrought on the Pentecostal church.

CHAPTER I

FROM PENTECOST TO LATTER RAIN

The year 1906 is well known to adherents of Pentecostalism. In that year in Los Angeles, California, at the “house on Bonnie Brae Street,” people experienced a visitation of God that resulted in many speaking in an unknown tongue, as well as experiencing other spiritual gifts and manifestations as outlined in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. Frank Bartleman relates an eyewitness account of Willela Ashbury, a lady who was part of the assembled group who had been seeking God:

I was a young girl at the time, but the event remains vivid in my mind. I was in the kitchen while a Bible study took place in the living room. Suddenly, there was a loud commotion in the living room, and I hurried to see what had happened. They were all cast to the floor from their chairs, unable to move. Then, as in the after effect of a direct strike of lightning, they began to stir, with a glow and power of the Holy Spirit upon them. Young Brad Traynor was on the front porch prophesying and preaching. Jennie Moore stood up and prophesied in what others declared was Hebrew. Then she went to the piano and, for the first time in her life, began playing beautiful music and singing in a beautiful voice, [these gifts she never lost, and at this writing (1974) the piano is still in the cottage at Bonnie Brae Street]. Those present when it happened declared that the porch became the pulpit and the street became the pews.¹

This eruption of Pentecostalism soon moved from the Bonnie Brae location into an abandoned Methodist church on Azusa Street, and under the ministerial direction of the Reverend William Seymour, Pentecostalism exploded into a worldwide phenomenon. People from across the United States and many parts of the world journeyed to Los Angeles to investigate and witness the amazing spiritual events that were being reported. Multitudes left Azusa Street with the Pentecostal experience and carried it back to their

¹Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1980), p. 16-17 of introduction.

local areas. Though these kinds of Pentecostal manifestations had been experienced and widely reported under the ministry of Charles Fox Parham in Topeka, Kansas in 1901, it is the events of Azusa Street to which most Pentecostals point to as the origins of their spiritual heritage.

On April 18, 1906, newspaper headlines in Los Angeles attempted to describe what happened at Azusa Street:

Weird Babble of Tongues-New Sect of Fanatics Is Breaking Loose-Wild Scene Last Night on Azusa Street-Gurgle of Wordless Talk by a Sister²

The press was at a disadvantage to adequately understand or explain spiritual happenings. They looked on in astonishment, and often viewed the Azusa Street occurrences as the work of the poorly educated or more radical, religious driven zealots. However, the press was not alone in its inability to fully comprehend what had transpired at that secluded, abandoned Methodist church in Los Angeles. The mainline, established churches and denominations were also thrown into a quandary as Azusa Street's impact began to be felt throughout the United States. Many theological questions were raised regarding the life and power of the Spirit. Hermeneutical debates raged constantly as ministries and churches searched biblical texts in order to either accept or renounce these new experiences. Many saw this fresh outpouring of the Spirit as a new door of spiritual opportunity that had been set before the church, and many took the opposite position, viewing this new phenomenon as, at the least, misguided zeal and fanaticism, and, at the worst, the work of the Devil. But despite the turmoil, confusion, and strife, Pentecost had come to stay. Over the next four decades, Pentecostalism would experience an

²Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 39.

accelerated growth and see the rise of various Pentecostal denominations. The Assemblies of God, founded in 1914, and by 1947 had established 5,400 churches, boasted a membership of 250,000, and had ordained some 5,100 ministers.³ The Church of God and Pentecostal Holiness, as well as a profusion of Pentecostal fellowships and associations, also came into being at this time. Pentecostalism had also become solidly embedded in many countries of the world.

Along with the zeal and openness to the Spirit, Pentecostalism also introduced some major teachings that formed the basis of Pentecostal doctrine. These were justification by faith, divine healing, as in the atonement, the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues, sanctification as a definite work of grace, and the personal, pre-millennial rapture of the saints at the second coming of Christ.

A number of factors had played an important role in helping to spark the Pentecostal visitation. At the center of it all, lay the longing and desire in many hearts for a deeper experience with God than what was being offered within the mainline, traditional churches. For example, Charles Parham was convinced from his reading of scripture that the church was only seeing a small measure of the Spirit's life and power, and that more could be possessed, if a person so desired to seek after it. Hence, he and a small group from his Bible college began to seek for more. This is a principle within Christianity that had served to be a catalyst for other significant spiritual happenings, especially among the Reformers. For example, Luther looked at all the religiosity in his day and became convinced that there was more to God than the trappings and offices of the church. He began a personal pursuit of prayer and scriptural study and discovered a new concept of

³Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), p. 30.

God's grace and gift of salvation.⁴ Seeking God and constantly looking for and expecting great and wonderful things from God became a hallmark of Pentecostalism. But as the 1930s began, much of the excitement, enthusiasm, and expectation of the Pentecostal movement had begun to wane. Pentecostals, who constantly pointed to mainline churches and decried their spiritual complacency, were succumbing to the same malady. Many began to sense that the wonderful ministry of the Spirit that they had grown to love and cherish, and that had become the trademark of their services, had now been replaced with form and routine. In the midst of this onset of spiritual apathy, there were those now among the Pentecostals who began to yearn for a fresh wave of the Spirit. Historian David Harrell remarks,

Immediately after WWII, the psychology of the Pentecostal movement began to change. There was a longing for a renewal of the divine healing and manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit that seemed to be disappearing from the church. A new generation was hungry for a revival of its own.⁵

In 1947, there was another eruption of Pentecostal activity. It was during this time that well-known healing Evangelists, such as Oral Roberts and William Branham, were consistently crossing America conducting vast revival crusades, mostly held in huge gospel tents. It was a time of unprecedented revivalism. It was as though there were revivals everywhere. At this same time, there was another event taking place in western Canada that was destined to sharply divide a large segment of Pentecostalism, much the way that Pentecostalism had done to the mainline churches.

⁴ Hans Hillerbrand, Editor, *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1972), p. 21-23.

⁵ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *All Things Are Possible-The Healing and Charismatic Revival In America* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 18.

At Sharon Bible School in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, much like the one at Azusa Street. Like Azusa Street, North Battleford's visitation saw the gifts of the Spirit and other Pentecostal manifestations. But as this move progressed, some "new truths" began to develop that would be the source of a tension that would prove to be disconcerting to the majority of the Pentecostal church.

Central to these new truths was the emphasis on the restoration of the ministry gifts of Apostles and prophets, a new emphasis on church polity, a stressing of divine revelation, and eventually what was destined to trigger violent opposition - the concept of Sonship. The response to this new move in Canada was similar to the response demonstrated at the news of Azusa Street. Multitudes flocked to North Battleford to investigate the news reports that washed across America. Among the inquirers were numerous pastors and church workers, so it was not long until many of these new truths were being proclaimed from American pulpits. Battle lines were drawn between the established Pentecostal churches and the "new move." A host of names was attached to this new movement. It came to be called "new order," "deeper life movement," "new order of the Latter Rain," "Latter Rain Movement," and, as the concept of Sonship emerged, it was referred to as "the Manifested Sons of God." Probably the most popular name is the New Order of the Latter Rain, or, simply, The Latter Rain Movement.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS SONSHIP?

Adherents to Sonship maintain that Sonship is a revelation of the Word of God regarding God's ultimate purposes of dealing with humankind. Sonship is seen as a constant unfolding of revelatory truth that is only grasped by those that have been chosen for Sonship. The term "doctrine" would make many within the movement uneasy, as they perceive that word as representative of teachings that are structured and unbending. However, if one embraces the simple definitions of doctrine that it is simply something taught or a body of principles presented for acceptance or belief by a religious body, then Sonship certainly has its doctrines. The formulation of Sonship teaching encompasses the whole Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, Sonship teachers develop a vast and, at times, complex picture of God's purposes that are to unfold within his chosen ones. Christian author and minister, Paul Billheimer, who spent decades writing and teaching Sonship principles, has written,

In order to understand what happened at Calvary, one must first comprehend what took place legally in the fall in Eden. Man was originally made for authority. He was created and fashioned for dominion. When he came from the hand of God, he was given rulership of the earth, the kingship of the earth, the kingship of this life, and the control and mastery of its resources.¹

According to Billheimer, although humankind fell, God had provided a way back to the place of authority and dominion that Adam had inhabited. Sonship is very much concerned with God's purposes, especially for the end time. Just as some Christians, hungry for more of God, began to ask near the turn of the 20th century whether God had anything for them beyond just experiencing conversion, now, after the outpouring at

¹Paul E. Billheimer, *Destined For the Throne* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1975) p. 72.

North Battleford, many Pentecostals were asking if God had more after one experienced Pentecost. To this question, Sonship boldly answered yes. The Reverend Bill Britton, perhaps the most prolific writer of the Sonship movement, wrote:

The High Calling of God is not the building of a lot of churches, or attaining to an Apostleship. Paul had all that. It was not getting visions or revelations, or supernatural visitations or experiences, It's something far beyond that...it is the fullness of what we have only received the foretaste or pledge. It is that which no man, except Jesus of Nazareth, has ever come into yet, but which is reserved for the end times. We are about to move in.²

The core idea of Sonship teaching is the concept of chosen believers coming to the full stature of Jesus Christ. In other words, God will replicate the ministry that Jesus demonstrated on earth within those who have been chosen for this “High Calling” of Sonship. This is a process of growth and spiritual development orchestrated by the Holy Spirit within the lives of those who are called and chosen. Within God’s purposes and plans for the end time, one of His main goals, from Sonship’s viewpoint, is for a group, company, or body of saints to come forth in the image of Christ, and to eventually receive a greater measure, or the fullness, of the Spirit’s anointing. That will enable them to literally manifest the same power and ministry that Jesus exhibited during his earthly ministry. Bill Britton underscores this concept:

Restoration of creation, redemption of mankind and binding of all Satanic powers depend upon a people coming to the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13).³

²Bill Britton, “Upreach and Outreach,” *Eagle Saints Arise* (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, [n.d.]), p. 26.

³Bill Britton, *Sonship Says Jesus Is Lord* (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press,[n.d.]), p.1.

Sonship preaching and literature refer to these chosen people by various names. Some of the names by which they have been called are Overcomers, Sons of God, Joel's Army and Kingdom people.

Adherents of Sonship strongly maintain that their teachings are firmly rooted within the Bible. And they are quick to add that these truths can only be known through a personal revelation as the Spirit shines his light on biblical texts. Indeed, in their view, these truths are purposely hidden by God and only revealed to those whom God selects for the high calling. This part of their teaching projects a strong esoteric nature and has caused many to view them with apprehension and concern. It has caused them to be characterized as spiritual elitists.

Another segment of Sonship teaching that helped to drive a wedge between it and the established Pentecostal churches is Sonship's ardent ant-sectarian belief. For many early Sonship leaders, there was no room for what God was doing inside the established denominations or churches that represented any form of organized religion. From the beginning, Sonship leaders identified organized religion as representative of Mystery Babylon, a place of religious bondage, confusion, and basically opposed to the Lordship of Christ. On this subject, Bill Britton has commented:

I have a reputation for being anti-denominational and non-sectarian. And I don't deny it. I made the statement in our Basic Beliefs printed in our 1980 calendar that the sectarian system of denominationalism is an artificial invention of men, and was never ordained by God, and that it will be destroyed so that Christ will have a glorious church on earth. God hates the system.⁴

Britton and other leaders seek to clarify the point that when they talk about the Babylonian system of religion, they are primarily talking about religious systems and not

⁴Bill Britton, *Truth on the Treadmill* (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, 1982), p. 6.

the people who are part of those systems. They are willing to accept those who participate in the religious systems as brothers and sisters in Christ, but maintain that in order to move on to God's higher purposes, one must separate from these systems. The message of "Come out of her my people" is an important Sonship appeal.⁵

Factors within Sonship teaching create this anti-sectarian, anti-denominational feeling, but perhaps the governing reason is that Sonship views God's designs as constantly moving forward. God's purpose, in their conception, is based upon the revelation of the Christ that is given by the Spirit, and it is constantly growing and maturing. Sonship thought says that God is doing a new thing, and what he did years ago, or a generation ago, is not necessarily valid for this present day. They view various denominational expressions and methods as a "past glory," that had its day, but will never rise again to play a significant role in God's end time purposes. In a sermon that Bill Britton delivered at one of his conventions on "The Melchisedec Priesthood," he pointed out "that you can look for a revival of Methodism if you want, but it will never happen. You can look for a revival of Presbyterianism if you want, but it will never happen, and you can even look for a revival of Pentecostalism if you want, but it will never happen. God has a new order."⁶ They firmly believe in a new order, or realm, and it is usually referred to as the Kingdom realm. Given that perspective, it is not hard to see why they encourage the renunciation of denominations and religious organizations. For Sonship, these are dead realms, and simply are no longer a vital element of God's ultimate plans. This

⁵ Revelation 18:4 KJV (King James Version).

⁶Sermon "The Melchisedec Priesthood," Preached by Bill Britton in 1969 in a Convention at Spiro, Oklahoma.

perspective, of course, served to further incite the Pentecostals' admonitions that at the heart of the Sonship message was a spiritual elitism and an esoteric character.

The new truths that Sonship regularly evinced was constantly creating a larger gulf between it and Pentecostalism. Perhaps one of the teachings that drove a greater wedge between these movements was the insistence of Sonship that the Rapture message (the pre-millennial, pre-tribulation second coming of Christ) was a spurious teaching. They contend that this false teaching entered the church in 1830 as a result of a vision of Margaret McDonald, a young Scottish Christian, in which after going into a trance, she described that she saw the saints leaving the earth at the coming of the Lord before the tribulation.⁷ Margaret McDonald was living in Port-Glasgow at the time of her purported revelation.

Edward Irving, a minister who had been excommunicated by the London Presbytery, and in 1833 was defrocked by the Church of Scotland because of his teachings on "the sinfulness of Christ's humanity," began to teach the rapture of the saints before the tribulation, based on McDonald's vision. According to Bill Britton, her "revelation" was also recorded in a book written by R. N. Norton, which was printed in London in 1861. According to Britton, prior to this time, the church, clear back to the Apostles, had always preached that the church would go victoriously through the tribulation.⁸

It was not long until Irving's message of the rapture was being taught in prophetic conferences at Powerscourt House in Ireland, which was attended by Plymouth Brethren organizer, John Darby. Irving's views greatly influenced him, as well as C. H.

⁷Reverend E.H. Brittain, "Origin of the Rapture Theory," *Jesus Saves-Abundant Life Messages* (Fletcher, Missouri: Little Mount Zion Press, 1958), Series Number Eleven, p. 13.

⁸Reverend Bill Britton, *A Closer Look at the Rapture* (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, [n.d.]), p. 58.

Mackintosh and C. I. Scofield, whose Bible notes were instrumental in spreading this new theory. By the early 1900s, it had been assimilated into the teachings and doctrinal statements of many denominations and Christian fellowships, especially Pentecostalism.

It is easy to understand why Sonship assumes such a strong stance against the message of a pre-millennial rapture of the saints. Besides their view that this teaching is unscriptural, if this teaching was authentic, then the message of Sonship would break down. Nearly all that Sonship stresses and admonishes hinges on the premise that during the Great Tribulation and time of global upheaval, God's sons will come to the forefront, proclaiming a message of hope and deliverance, and manifesting the glory and power of God. For them, the rapture message is not only erroneous, but it also robs God of the glory of His incomparable purposes. That is why they often point to the rapture as a message of fear and defeat, postulated by a church which has lost its vision, power, and victory.

Another vital aspect of Sonship doctrine is the way in which they view the order of worship in a local congregation, as well as the model of church polity that is, in their judgment, the most biblically correct.

One of the compelling forces behind Sonship is to always endeavor to remain true to the leadership and will of the Holy Spirit. They seek to implement this approach with every facet of church life, as well as their personal faith walk. A great fear of theirs is to regress from the high calling of Sonship and to "be like Babylon," i.e, the majority of established churches, especially those within mainline denominations. Among all that distresses them regarding how most churches operate and do ministry, the form and style of their worship services are a particular area which they find troublesome. In order to rectify that, Sonship leaders have sought to devise alternative formats of worship services

that, in their view, are more true to the pattern outlined in scripture, or at least, permits the Spirit His rightful place of leadership. These kinds of new liturgical formats could be grouped as either structured or unstructured.

An example of a structured approach would be a service that looked much like a traditional Pentecostal service, but with an overriding insistence that the Spirit was free to have His way and to take the service in any direction He desired. However, at the heart of this system is the “covering” of strong, pastoral monitoring and supervision. The pastoral “covering” usually would consist of a pastor and a body of elders. The understanding is that if the leadership is in alignment with God, then the Spirit’s workings will not be impeded and biblical order and proper spiritual decorum can be maintained.

An unstructured pattern would be an example of the model that Bill Britton implemented at his congregation, The House of Prayer, in Springfield, Missouri. In 1962, Britton began home meetings that eventually grew in numbers and evolved into a local church. The format of these home meetings became the basis, or model, for the worship expression that was adopted by The House of Prayer.⁹ The group would gather with no particular agenda in mind. One witnessing this kind or type of worship could be easily reminded of the Quakers. Quite often there was no appointed or designated song leader, and songs (almost always choruses) would be started by someone in the congregation, with the congregation following the lead and joining in. Quite frequently the worship service would be interspersed with the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit,

⁹The name *House of Prayer* was used for the home meetings as well. According to Becky Britton Volz, Bill Britton’s daughter, it was a bumper sticker that had been mailed to the Britton home, and they adopted it as the name of the group.

especially prophecy. People also would share personal revelations or anything they felt was from the Spirit and was to be shared with the church. When it came time for the Word of God to be proclaimed, this, too, was often accomplished by various people. Plurality of ministries was constantly emphasized. Though it has all the appearances of being a loose, unchecked gathering, the resident ministries were ever watchful that all would flow onward according to the Spirit's direction. This pattern was briefly described by Phil Britton:

In Springfield, at the House of Prayer, was the first place Daddy had ever seen real plural ministry in operation. We had five preachers who equally shared the pulpit and the government of the church. One was a pastor with a real shepherd's heart and ministry. One was a prophet, one a teacher, one with an evangelist's ministry and one called to be an apostle. There it was...a five fold ministry in one church, all equal and all filling a particular need in the church. The pastor didn't run the show, nor did the apostle have the last word. And they were one in Spirit. The devil could not divide them no matter how hard he tried. This really seemed to be divine order. We had reached our goal.¹⁰

These brief illustrations of a structured and unstructured model of Sonship liturgy are, without a doubt, only a glimpse of what they were trying to achieve. The model to which Britton ascribed was popular among many Sonship groups, as it offered an informal, more relaxed mode, as well as being a pronounced divergence from the standard type of service. It was also a widespread model because many Sonship groups were meeting in casual settings, such as homes, storefronts, and farms. These two models are not the only methods employed by these groups, and one could find about everything in between being offered, but they formed a basis upon which most groups were built.

¹⁰Phillip Britton, *Prophet on Wheels: The Life Story of Bill Britton* (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: Destiny Image Publishers, 1987), p. 133.

The 1950s and early 1960s were a time of struggle for the Sonship movement as it began to take root and spread. One of the major instruments for its propagation was the convention format. The convention setting was a time when various Sonship ministries and groups converged on a designated site, usually a city of significant size, and for several days worshipped together and heard the groups' latest revelations and teachings. Despite the struggles, difficulties, and strong resistance from the established churches, Sonship began to put down solid roots and grow. The middle of the 1960s saw Sonship churches and fellowships dotting America's religious landscape.

CHAPTER III

LEADING MINISTRIES OF THE EARLY MOVEMENT

After the Latter Rain revival started at Sharon Bible School in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, Vinson Synan records that two main centers of its influence in the United States during the latter parts of the 1940s were Detroit's Bethesda Missionary Temple, pastored by Myrtle D. Beall, and the ministries of Ivan and Minnie Spencer, who were instrumental in bringing Elim Bible Institute into the movement.¹ As Sonship evolved from Latter Rain and became entrenched as a religious force in its own right, several prominent voices emerged, whose ministries, personalities, and charismatic leadership influenced the shaping and guiding of the movement.

Clearly, a ministry that is readily named as one of the founding fathers of the Sonship Movement is the late Reverend Sam Fife. A Baptist minister who embraced Pentecostalism, he soon dropped out of the existing churches and began to declare "new truths" concerning God's purposes for His church in the "last days." One of the hallmarks of the particular segment of the Sonship Movement under Fife's direction was the establishing of "refuge farms."² These places were usually located in a secluded spot where members of the movement would live, minister, and nurture each other while awaiting society's economic collapse and the period of time referred to in the Bible as the Great Tribulation. The movement established communities in South America, the United States, and Canada. More than a few are still in existence today, and they continue to be centers for the fostering and dissemination of Sonship teachings.

¹Synan, p. 253.

²In the beginning, this term was loosely applied to these communal gatherings, but many in the present day movement feel that "refuge farms" is an inappropriate title, and contend that "Communities" is a better way of describing this concept.

Otis Winters was a member of the early Fife movement, eventually rising to the status of serving as an elder. He spent over 20 years of his life involved with the communities. Most of his time was spent at the Peruvian location (13 years). Winters was raised in the Church of the Brethren, and describes a time when he departed from the faith, but testifies that despite some rocky times, he always had a deep desire to know Christ in a way that he had never experienced. While working at a local manufacturing plant, a Christian began witnessing to him about the goodness of God, as well as introducing him to the concept of the baptism of the Holy Ghost. It was at a time when the Charismatic movement was gaining strength and popularity. Otis rededicated himself to Christ, and it was not long until he experienced the Pentecostal “blessing,” with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. Shortly after that occurrence, he was invited to a meeting that was being held on a farm located near Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. The speaker that evening was a visiting minister named Sam Fife. From that evening on, Otis wholeheartedly embraced the message of Sonship.³

One of the principal focuses of Fife’s group in that day was what they perceived as the eventual economic and moral collapse of the social order. Within this apocalyptic point of view, Fife and other movement leaders began to envision the formulation of communes where believers could find a safe haven from the coming anarchy. This concept was reinforced by their literal acceptance of the biblical text found in Revelation twelve, where it describes, in their view, a time of great tribulation when, according to their understanding of verses six and fourteen, the church (symbolized in scripture by the woman) has to flee into the wilderness to find nurture and protection. With what they

³Telephone interview with Otis Winters, 15 February 2006.

regarded as a clear, spiritual revelation and a scriptural mandate, efforts were begun to establish wilderness communities.

Winters relates that in the beginning, life at one of these communities was loose and unorganized. In due course, as different elders from the United States such as Jack Enrow, Jeff Sanders, and, of course, Sam Fife, began to frequent the camps, they steered the group toward a more ordered approach. Winters describes a typical day at a wilderness community in Peru:

The day began with praise and worship. All meals were eaten together. Then it was off to take care of assigned chores. The communities were designed to be as totally self sufficient as possible. Farm animals were kept, (often pigs would be sold to the local people which helped raise funds) crops were raised, and a host of other duties that maintaining a small community needed to be tended to. We were about 20 miles from any town, and due to the collapse of the bridge, we could only get there by taking a canoe down the river. We had to go to the town for fuel, etc. The only time we had electric was when we'd run our generators. The rest of the time we utilized kerosene lamps and stoves. At night we often had elders' meetings and devotions. Often, ministries from the states came to the camp to minister and share. Sam (Fife) usually visited us twice a year. We found ourselves eventually being able to reach out to Peruvians who were near us, so evangelism became important to what we were doing.⁴

When describing his life among these communities, Winters points out that another important concept regarding life there was that living together corporately brought one into situations that served to purify and confront him in ways that other circumstances or arrangements rarely did. So, in a sense, one of the enormous benefits of spending time in a wilderness community was that it uniquely taught one principles of faith, longsuffering, love, and selflessness. As Winters admits, "it was not for everyone. It was not uncommon for folks to show up, stay awhile, but then decide that for whatever reason,

⁴Otis Winter's interview, 15 February 2006.

community living was not for them. But for those who stuck it out, there was a dying to self and a rediscovering of what it meant to die daily.”

The message of Sonship and hostility were always linked together. The message simply generated tension and conflict wherever it was proclaimed. Therefore, it is not surprising that its leaders were usually shrouded in controversy. However, Fife generated mystery and opposition, perhaps more than any personality who was central to the Sonship Movement. When his ministerial legacy is examined today, the critique is often negative, as many scholars, researchers, and even large numbers within the present Sonship Movement, feel that his teachings moved into areas that can only be judged as glaring biblical error. An example of this was the teaching that he developed on the second coming of Christ. Because Sonship emphasizes the nature and likeness of Christ being formed within the chosen people, Fife began to teach that Christ’s second coming was really Christ coming in His sons, and that He really was not literally going to return. A figure who was loved, as well as mistrusted, and acclaimed as an Apostolic voice by many, he embodies the kind of persona that one is either for or against, but can not be ignored.

Whatever side one takes in this debate, the indisputable fact remains that he blazed an influential trail for the Sonship Movement and was instrumental in helping to bring Sonship into main streams of established Christianity. His groups regularly held conventions in many of the major cities of America, as well as many foreign countries. He authored many books, and a large collection of teaching tapes and sermons found

their way into countless homes. Sam Fife's concept of the Sonship message ultimately became a worldwide movement.⁵

There is no doubt that the ministry of the late Reverend Bill Britton served to expand the Sonship Movement and establish it as a force within American Christendom, eventually crossing international borders until many nations were touched by his writings, tapes, or crusades. An enormous number of adherents of the Sonship message will easily identify him as one, if not the main source, that influenced them the most.

Shortly after graduating from high school, Bill Britton was born again and he began his Christian journey. Though Britton had been exposed to the ministry of a little Baptist church when he was 12 years old, his spiritual life was not affected. However, a Pentecostal church opened in his home town soon after he turned 16, and what began as an interest in this new and "strange church" that met in a store front, eventually led to his conversion. When World War II ended and he was discharged from the Marine Corps, he was licensed as an Assemblies of God minister in the Southern Missouri District, where he enrolled in Central Bible Institute in Springfield, Missouri. After graduation, Britton followed the usual path that was germane to most Pentecostal ministries of that day. He began as an Evangelist, holding services in mostly small churches and, occasionally, pastoring small, rural churches. Early Pentecostal clergy usually knew what it was to "pay their dues" as they traveled and ministered, and often their only monetary compensation was the love offerings from congregations to whom they ministered. This was commonly referred to as "living by faith."

⁵As this author often points out in this thesis, the term Sonship is synonymous with other terms such as Kingdom Message, Dominion Theology, Manifested Sons, to name a few. Adherents to the Fife movement prefer the term "Move of God." Though they readily admit that Sonship is at the core of what they are saying, Sonship, in their view, can carry the connotation of being a "doctrine." That is one thing they want to avoid, for they see the Move of God as constantly unfolding and progressing.

In the spring of 1949, the Assemblies of God held a national Sunday School conference in Springfield, and clergy from across the country were in attendance. Some brought with them news of a great move of the Spirit in Canada and Michigan. Intrigued, Britton earnestly began to check out the reports, and after attending a number of Latter Rain services, he came away convinced that what had taken place at those places was of God, and the beginning of the fulfillment of powerful and wonderful things that God had promised his people.

Assemblies of God leaders and officials did not take long to register their disapproval of this new move of the Spirit, and began to send out urgent admonitions to Assemblies' ministers and churches to avoid the teachings and practices of the Latter Rain Movement. But for Britton, as well as a host of other Assemblies' ministers, it was too late. He wholeheartedly embraced the movement, and it was not long until his Assemblies of God ordination was revoked. Britton found himself among the swelling ranks of ministers ostracized because of their affinity with the Latter Rain Movement.

Britton finally settled in Springfield, Missouri, where he founded a church, The House of Prayer. From this base of operations, the message of Sonship flowed throughout the nation and the world. The primary instrument for this was the printing press. Britton was a celebrated Bible teacher and was in great demand as a convention speaker, but, perhaps, his greatest expertise was with the pen. He was a gifted writer, and his booklets, tracts, and other forms of printed literature were in great demand in many homes, churches, and fellowships. Though he also distributed large quantities of teaching tapes, and periodically traveled throughout the world advancing Sonship teachings, usually before someone met him personally, they had already read one or more of his books.

As with many of his colleagues in the realm of Sonship teaching, Britton, too, knew his times of persecution and rejection. (For a while, Britton was associated with Sam Fife, but they parted company, as Britton became troubled over some of Fife's teachings, especially the wilderness communities).⁶ However, Britton's teachings found a huge audience, and his winning personality and demeanor enabled him to be effective in introducing Sonship in a way that caused many to at least begin to examine what was being declared. As Ern Baxter, a well known Florida-based Bible teacher, who was part of the group that came to be known as the Shepherding Movement⁷ stated,

His deep love for people amassed him a host of friends. Some who did not know him personally attacked him for his views, and were unnecessarily unkind. But there were others who did not agree with everything he taught, but knew him as a man, and held him in genuine affection and esteem.⁸

Britton's charismatic personality, coupled with his ability to present the Sonship message from a strong biblical perspective, enabled him to witness widespread acceptance of the message during the nearly four decades of his ministry. It is not an embellishment to say that it was through Britton's ministry that the Sonship message received greater prominence.

⁶ Telephone interview with Frank Lopez, 1 February 2006.

⁷The Shepherding Movement came to prominence in the early 1970s. It was central to the teachings of five popular Bible teachers, based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. They, in fact, were sometimes referred to as the Fort Lauderdale 5. They were Ern Baxter, Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Gerald Derstine and Charles Simpson. In simplest language, The Shepherding Movement was based on the concept that every Christian needed to be under a Pastor or church "covering" in order to hope to move into God's greater purposes. This movement's message was one of spiritual restoration and was heavily influenced by Latter Rain concepts. The "covering" message was taken to extremes where the pastor or church were at the center of most of the decision making of its members, even assuming responsibility for personal decisions that should have been left to the families or members to choose for themselves.

⁸Britton, Phillip, p.11 of Forward.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Britton's popularity started to blossom. This time a new wave of the Spirit was sweeping across many of the mainline churches that became known as the Charismatic Movement. Though the established Pentecostal churches were in need of renewal at this time, it viewed the Charismatic Movement with apprehension. Charismatics were seen as too liberal in many things that unsettled the established Pentecostals. Their style of worship, their willingness to reach out to all denominations, their lifestyles and outward appearance were among the factors that made much of the Pentecostal church fearful of Charismatics. However, among many of the mainline denominational people, the Charismatic Movement found acceptance. Vinson Synan stated it well:

For six decades (1901-60) Pentecostalism was considered to be outside the pale of respectable Christianity in America and the world. The Pentecostals were noisy and to many people disorderly. Their worship was beyond understanding to those without knowledge of the inner spirituality that undergirded the movement. On top of this, most Pentecostals were poor, underprivileged, uneducated, and out of touch with the latest theological trends that preoccupied most of Pentecostalism.⁹

Beginning on a November day in 1959, the Charismatic Movement began in Van Nuys, California when an Episcopalian priest, the Reverend Dennis Bennett, received the Pentecostal experience and began to speak in tongues. It was not long until every major denomination was affected by this movement, as a significant number of priests and ministers received the experience. The Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, founded by Demos Shakarian, a wealthy California layman, was extremely influential in advancing the Charismatic Movement, especially in being a vehicle for taking it to a more global community. Pentecost had "moved up town."

⁹Synan, p. 149.

The Charismatic Movement, however, ushered into the church more than just another Pentecostal eruption. Along with its contribution of introducing Glossolalia to the major denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, it continued to evolve as a movement to become a forum for deeper life teachings and served to motivate a large segment of the Christian community, especially the Pentecostal segment, to rediscover the Word of God. Renown Bible teachers such as Derek Prince, Gerald Derstine, and Bob Mumford, to name a few, soared in popularity. As gifted men and women strove to examine God's purposes in light of His Word, Bill Britton's writings and messages began to resonate with a generation of believers who wanted more than an emotional tie to the Holy Spirit. Sonship provided this generation much of what they were seeking. It offered challenges to grow in one's faith, and declared a vision of victory and glory for the church that many of the Charismatics could readily embrace. Bill Britton was a featured speaker at Full Gospel Businessmen's meetings. And many of its leading Bible teachers frequently fellowshiped with Britton and ministered in his church in Springfield. Because the reproach and stigma associated with Sonship never died out, the principles and concepts it offered were, nevertheless, assimilated by many of the Charismatic's leading teachers, but packaged and labeled by other names. Sonship, therefore, saw its principles and influence grow ever stronger and became a guiding light for the Charismatic Movement's direction, and served to spawn numerous ministries that, with the use of modern media, technology, and communications, served as an army of ambassadors for Sonship teachings. The landscape of American Christianity was forever altered by the Charismatic Movement, and lurking behind and within its convergence were the seeds of Latter Rain and Sonship influence. By the 1960s, these seeds, which had been watered by many men and women of faith and conviction, had begun to bear

much fruit, which was evidenced in the teachings and emphasis of many leading Charismatic ministries, and which continues to bear fruit in many of today's prominent ministries and movements.

CHAPTER IV

MODERN HERALDS OF SONSHIP THOUGHT

It is difficult to fully understand the current Pentecostal explosion (not only happening in America, but throughout the world) without linking it to the Restorative, Word of Faith, and Kingdom Now movements. It is seldom realized just how influential the Latter Rain Movement and the Sonship Movement that emerged were, and how firmly entrenched their teachings have become in much of the present Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

There had always been a clear line of separation between mainline and evangelical churches and the Pentecostals. For nearly 60 years, from 1901 to 1960, Pentecostalism was viewed as being on the fringes of Orthodox Christianity. The Pentecostals' style of worship, as well as their preaching, was seen by mainline churches and officials as being loud and uncontrolled. There was a gulf between these two groups that seemed insurmountable. In the 1960s and '70s, however, that gulf was, indeed, surmounted in a measure as the Charismatic Movement succeeded in penetrating every major denomination. For a season, spiritual renewal graced many of the world's oldest, traditional religious movements. To this day, some of that renewal still remains. For example, Gary Moore, a layman who was appointed by the United Methodist renewalists to lead their movement, conducts annual "Aldersgate" conferences from a new retreat center in Goodlettsville, Tennessee. Thousands of Methodist Charismatics attend.¹ Yet, for the most part, there is a great cry of alarm from the mainline churches, as they lament

¹ Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 184.

the dwindling attendance numbers, loss of financial strength, and a consistent failure to retain the younger generation who eagerly seek religious fulfillment in more contemporary and informal churches. In an article from *The Journal News*, reporter Gary Stern writes:

For decades, the mainline churches were in denial; for the past decades people were grieving for the days of yore, says the Rev. Michael Caine, Minister of the Southeastern Region of the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ. Now we're starting to look at what's out there, to figure out how to bring our understanding of the Christian gospel to those who need it. How do we do that? I'm not sure we know.²

Stern gives us a glimpse of the frustration, as well as the hopelessness that grips much of the mainline Protestant landscape. It reflects a picture of religious movements that have failed, or, at the least, were slow to adapt to a changing world. It is also the reflection of a liberal approach to theology that has watered down much of the gospel message until it has lost much of its relevance. These denominations are now desperately seeking ways to reverse the trends and transform their movements before it is too late.

However, Pentecostalism, which saw itself as having broken away from many of the spiritual maladies that encumbered the mainline groups, saw the fire and zeal of its movement curtailed during the early 20th century. Doctrinal bickering had splintered Pentecostalism and had driven a wedge between many groups that held similar belief systems and views of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism found itself in need of renewal and reform. Shortly after World War II, new, refreshing winds of the Spirit did begin to blow through Pentecostalism that were destined to take all that would accept it to new heights

²Gary Stern, "Mainline Protestants Being Left Behind," *The Journal News*, 4 May 2003.

and dramatic new directions. New opportunities offered themselves to those who could be flexible and open to new ways of doing ministry, as the Latter Rain Movement and, later, the Charismatic Movement challenged traditional Pentecostals to make the transition to a more diversified approach to ministry. An example of this would be Oral Roberts' spiritual journey. Having deep roots in the Pentecostal Holiness Movement, Roberts was able to embrace the Latter Rain experience and reaped the benefits as he saw his healing crusades grow in amazing dimensions. He was able to recognize the importance of the Charismatic movement and make the transition in his ministry that enabled him to carve out a major area within that movement. When religious telecasting began to rise in popularity, Roberts, again, was on the cutting edge. Later on he would establish a University that bears his name, which by the year 2000 had reached an enrollment of over five thousand students, and had won a solid reputation within and without religious circles.³ But just as many mainline churches saw themselves left behind and struggling to maintain their identity, many Pentecostal churches now found themselves in that same quandary. There was now a gulf between classical Pentecostalism and those who were willing to move with the new streams of the Spirit. Vinson Synan reports,

Many Pentecostal scholars, historians, and theologians felt that the Pentecostals paid a steep price by becoming so close to the mainline evangelicals. In order to gain acceptance, they changed, the Pentecostals changed their original theological base to include many features that were not native to the Pentecostal theological culture and tradition. As a result, there was a slow decline in the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit in many Pentecostal churches and a closer alliance with the political positions advocated by the

³Synan, p. 335.

Christian right. By the 1990s, however, there seemed to be a parallel “Pentecostalization” of mainline evangelicals as charismatic worship became more and more acceptable in all churches.⁴

The new streams of the Spirit demanded flexibility and a willingness to adapt to new techniques, as Roberts’s example shows. But the new streams also necessitated a body of doctrine and teachings that could serve to explain and reconcile the new approaches that were overtaking the Pentecostal church. The time was ripe for a renewed search for a deeper understanding of God’s purposes and work among His people. The manifestation of the Spirit and spiritual experiences were still cherished and encouraged, but many people now hungered for the message of the Holy Spirit. The Charismatic movement’s influence, as well as the emergence of Christian television, played a huge role in helping the rise of numerous, gifted Bible teachers. Among these, and probably two of the best known, were Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin, Sr.

Pentecost had married the Word and the Spirit. The premium was no longer just on spiritual manifestations, but there was a strong emphasis placed on the teaching of God’s Word. A multitude of gifted teachers and preachers rose to the challenge. And resident within much of this new onslaught of biblical exposition was the vision and message of Sonship. As this new breed of Pentecostal teachers and preachers made every effort to provide fresh, exciting, and challenging revelations and teachings of God’s Word to a new and hungry generation, they found themselves drawing heavily from the seeds of the deeper life teachings that had surfaced in the Latter Rain Movement, in which Sonship had emerged as one of its compelling concepts. For a generation that was both craving a

⁴Synan, p. 351.

renewing of the Spirit, as well as a more profound understanding of the Word of God, Sonship's time had come.

The seeds of Sonship not only began to bear fruit within the ministries of many prominent preachers and teachers, but entire fellowships, some expanding to the point of being seen or classified as new denominations, arose within mainstream American Christendom to become modern heralds of Sonship principles. In many cases, this influence was not limited to this country, but became international in scope.⁵ Through countless men and women, Christian movements and fellowships, and the unquestioned power and popularity of Christian telecasting, the voice of Sonship, though often packaged in various forms and approaches as in the past, is not only alive and well, but thriving.

⁵Russell Chandler, "Vineyard Fellowship Finds Groundswell of Followers." *Los Angeles Times* 5 October 1990, p. 34.

CHAPTER V

MEN AND WOMEN AS HERALDS

When one traces the seeds of Sonship thought and its influence upon modern day ministries, the list of those who fall within this category is extensive. Some of the best known are the personages who are the mainstay of what has become known as the Word of Faith Movement. Names such as Morris Cerullo, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, Fred Price, Rod Parsley, and Jesse Duplantis are a few examples, and they are known throughout much of the world. This list grows every year, as personalities like T.D. Jakes, Bishop Eddie Long, and Kim Clement have joined their ranks over the last decade. But, perhaps, the best known representatives of this movement are Kenneth Hagin, Sr. and Kenneth Copeland.

Kenneth Hagin, Sr. is regarded as the “father” of the modern day Word of Faith Movement. Quite often he was referred to as “Dad Hagin” by many within the movement. Born in 1917, he was the third child in his family, and deserted by his father who left no food or money for their care. However, God had visited his mother with the message, not to fear, for her child would grow up to help usher in a revival before the second coming of Christ. Hagin began his ministry in 1934, and for three years held evangelical meetings as a Baptist. He was later licensed by the Assemblies of God in 1937, and pastored churches for the next twelve years. In 1949, just as the Latter Rain Movement was gaining momentum, he became an itinerant evangelist and Bible teacher. He moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1966, and a new era of growth and popularity began for his ministry as he became increasingly in demand for public meetings and seminars, ministering to people of all Christian faiths.

It has been said that the only accurate evaluation of any movement begins by looking at the roots. Origin determines everything when it comes to spiritual evaluation. That theory is often applied to movements, but could as easily be a starting point for examining individual ministries. When discussing the theology and doctrinal emphasis of many of the Word of Faith teachers, the name of Essek William Kenyon eventually surfaces.

E.W. Kenyon was born in Saratoga County, New York in 1867. He was converted to Christ as a teenager, and he attended Emerson College of Oratory in Boston, where it is concluded that he came under the influence of metaphysical thought systems (often described as New Thought) that influenced his theology.¹ After founding a Bible school and pastoring several churches in New England, he moved to Los Angeles in 1923 where he was a pioneer in radio ministry. In 1931, he moved to Seattle, and pastored a Baptist church, and conducted a morning radio program. He authored over 15 books, and his central theme was usually the power of words spoken in faith and the supremacy of a so called “revelation knowledge” over knowledge obtained through the senses. “Faith counts the thing done before God has acted. That compels God to act.”²

Kenyon was not widely known during his lifetime, but his teachings on faith, healing, positive confession, revelation knowledge, and the godlike spiritual power available to “new creation” believers are concepts that found a renewed popularity within many of the modern day Word of Faith Ministries, especially Hagin’s.

In his book, *A Different Gospel*, D. R. McConnell argues that the real father of the Word of Faith movement is E. W. Kenyon. McConnell states emphatically that

¹Daniel G. Reid, and others, eds. *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity, 1990), p. 611.

² Ibid., p. 611.

Kenyon's teachings were, indeed, riddled with teachings from Metaphysical and Mind Science sources.³ McConnell records this statement from John Kennington, once a follower of E. W. Kenyon:

At one time I was a blind follower of Kenyon...Now with the passing of a little time and with a little more understanding, I have come to realize that E. W. Kenyon has simply "baptized" many concepts from Christian Science. In so doing, he became a source for a form of "Pentecostal Christian Science," even though Kenyon himself was not a Pentecostal.⁴

McConnell also argues that Hagin, beyond any doubt, plagiarized most of his teachings from the works of Kenyon.⁵ McConnell is not alone in his insistence that many Word of Faith teachers have drawn heavily from E. W. Kenyon. Hank Hanegraaff, of the Christian Research Institute, concurs that Kenyon's works permeate the movement's teachings, especially Hagin's. Probably the biggest concept of Kenyon's that became central to the movement's belief system, is the idea of positive confession, and the "name it claim it"⁶ approach to God's Word.

However, Hagin took "Kenyon theology" and went much further. Giving it a Pentecostal impetus, Hagin's teachings developed into a Dominion theology that was, in reality, nothing more than a revival of Sonship teaching in another guise.

According to John MacArthur, Jr.,

Dominion Theology, espoused primarily by John Wimber, who is networked through a group of churches called "The Vineyard Churches," basically is saying, "That as believers, we are to take power over Satan and demons, we are to exercise dominion over them. And what it basically says is that the

³D.R.McConnell *A Different Gospel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 14.

⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶"Name it claim it" is a phrase used to describe the Positive Confession concept that lies at the heart of much of the Word of Faith teaching. Positive Confession is a term that refers to the supernatural power of the human mind to influence the environment or the actions of God. It advocates that prosperity, happiness, health, success, and even miracles are products of humanity's thinking and faith. Faith is viewed as a force or power that, when expressed through the spoken word, can actually alter the spiritual and physical worlds. A positive confession can influence divine laws and force God to perform in a desired way.

church's mandate is to take over the institutions of the world. What Dominion Theology says is that we are to take over the Powers of Darkness; we are to take over the demons, and we are to take over the spirits, and we are to dominate Satan. We are to take dominion, and that's why they talk about "Power Evangelism" and "Power Healing." That's why he trains people, supposedly, to invade the Satanic world and take dominion over demons.⁷

MacArthur himself realizes that this is a simplistic definition, but it does a good job of identifying the core belief of this movement. It is also a modern, up-to-date definition, and he uses a contemporary ministry, the late John Wimber, as his example. However, this definition could just as well have been used by someone writing 50 years ago to briefly describe one of Sonship's basic concepts. For example, the following is an excerpt from one of the writings of the late Bill Britton, one of the premier teachers of Sonship thought. The similarities are unmistakable.

Yes, the Sons of God are destined to rule in the realm of principalities and powers, to judge and govern angels. Demons know their place. They know they are conquered and in subjection to the Sons of God who have come in divine authority. They cried out against Jesus, they fought him, they resisted him, but always had to obey when he spoke. They are defeated forever! They will completely obey the voice of that people that will rise up in divine dominion to the throne of God.⁸

Hagin's theology blended Word of Faith's emphasis on positive confession, divine health for the believer, and divine prosperity for God's people with major vestiges of Sonship ideas. Hagin readily embraced Sonship's emphasis of the eventual fullness of Christ indwelling chosen believers. He writes:

The believer is as much an incarnation of God as Jesus Christ. If we ever wake up and realize who we are, we'll start doing the work that we're supposed to do. Because the church hasn't realized yet that they are Christ. That's who they are. They are Christ.⁹

⁷Reverend John MacArthur, Jr. Question and Answer session at Grace Community Church in Panorama City, California. Tape GC 70-9, 2001.

⁸Reverend Bill Britton, *Sons of God Awake!* (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, No date), p. 14.

⁹Kenneth Hagin, Sr. "The Incarnation." *The Word of Faith* (December, 1980), p. 14.

The marks of Sonship thought ran deep in Kenneth Hagin's teaching and writings. His relentless attacks on the orthodox churches, his heavy reliance on personal revelations of the Word, his willingness to validate truth with personal experience, and his claim that the believer is just as much an incarnation of God as was Christ squarely puts much of what he taught within the Sonship camp. And because of the great stature and circle of influence that he commanded, he was a significant dispenser of modern day Sonship views by way of television, his Bible college, and tape and material distribution,.

One person influenced by Kenneth Hagin's ministry was Ken Copeland. Along with his wife, Gloria, Copeland was converted in 1962. Shortly thereafter, they were exposed to the Charismatic message, and they were both filled with the Spirit and spoke in tongues. In 1967, they moved to Tulsa so Copeland could attend Oral Roberts University, and he eventually became Roberts' co-pilot. It was while he was in Tulsa that he became exposed to the ministry of Kenneth Hagin. Copeland was given several of Hagin's teaching tapes. After he listened to them for about a month in his garage, he emerged "a changed man."¹⁰

The Copeland family returned to Ft. Worth after a year where Ken established his own ministry. In 1973, he initiated his own newsletter, *Believer's Voice of Victory*, which today is circulated around the globe. Through his radio broadcasts, television broadcasts, and satellite communications, Copeland's influence has been felt worldwide. He has international offices in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

From that base of influence and operations, the seeds of Sonship are daily flowing into large segments of the body of Christ on a worldwide basis. Just as parents pass on their

¹⁰Synan., p 348.

DNA to their children, which determines their heredity and many of their characteristics, Copeland represents a generation of preachers and teachers that have assimilated the Word of Faith message from various donors. For example, Kenneth Hagin Sr.'s teachings have been foundational for every major leader in the Faith Movement.¹¹

Just as Hagin constructed much of his faith teachings upon the works of E.W. Kenyon, Copeland adopted the foundation of Faith teachings that was laid by Hagin, but, like his mentor, built upon that foundation and developed a system of teachings regarding the calling and objectives of the body of Christ. Running throughout this system, and often guiding its course and shape, is an abundance of Sonship tenets.

Controversy follows the Word of Faith Movement almost as much as it did Sonship teachings when they emerged over 50 years ago. Scholars and critics regularly review and critique the direction this movement is headed. Hank Hanegraff, the controversial president of the Christian Research Institute in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, is but one example of those who closely monitor this movement and frequently author articles and books decrying what they perceive as its many erroneous biblical teachings. The bulk of the criticism seems to center on the Word of Faith's "cardinal" doctrines, and the ones with which most people are familiar, of positive confession and the promise of wealth, health, and prosperity to all who will follow their admonitions and faith formulas. However, theologians and Christian writers like Hanegraff have dug much deeper than the foundational beliefs and have discovered many things being disseminated by Word of Faith teachers that they find extremely troublesome, and unhesitatingly brand it as dangerous heresy to be avoided by the Body of Christ. What these men and women find

¹¹Charles H. Lippy, Editor. *Twentieth Century Shapers of American Popular Religion* (New York, New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 188.

so troubling, however, is what preachers, Christians, theologians, and church leaders wrestled with over five decades ago with the arrival of Sonship. It is the same dogma and biblical interpretations, but simply wrapped in a contemporary package.

A good example of this is Copeland's "revelation" and teaching that believers need to wake up to their true identity as that of "little gods." Copeland uses as his starting point the reference in Psalm 82:6 that supposedly identifies the child of God as a little god, and Jesus' apparent confirmation of this in John 10:34. Copeland has declared that "You don't have a god in you, you are one."¹² In his publication, *Believers Voice of Victory*, Copeland enlarges on this statement:

God's reason for creating Adam was his desire to reproduce himself. He was not a little like God. He was not almost like God. He was not subordinate to God even. Now Peter said by exceeding great and precious promises you become partakers of the divine nature. Alright, are we gods? We are a class of gods. Notice it doesn't say [Genesis 1:27-28] man was created almost in the image of God. It says that man was created exactly like God—he was the fullness of God. Adam did not fall short in any area in his likeness of God. He had the very creative power of God in him and on him...One man filled with the fullness of God, was commissioned and empowered by God to take dominion over the earth and bless it. This man, created in the image of God, like him in every way.¹³

Two dominant pillars upon which much of Sonship thought rests are the manifestation of the fullness of Christ's power and ministry through those within whom the fullness of the image of Christ has been formed, and the belief that the Sons of God will rise to dominion over this earth, release it from its present bondage and fallen state, and help usher in the Kingdom of God that will rule over all. Copeland's brief statements

¹²Hank Hanegraff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), p.110. Ken Copeland, "The Force of Love," Audio Tape, 1987.

¹³Kenneth Copeland, "Fullness: God's plan for His Family," *Believer's Voice of Victory*, (July & August, 2004), p.34.

regarding “ye are gods” incorporate both of those assertions. And when one sorts through many of his teachings, these concepts are stressed.

Resident within this enormously influential ministry are the fruits of many seeds planted by pioneers of the Sonship Movement. Either knowingly or unconsciously, most of the Word of Faith ministries continue to fan the flames of an earlier movement that many thought had come, seen its day, and died. In the conclusion of an article analyzing the Manifested Sons of God movement, pastor Bill Randles states: “There is no Manifested Sons of God organization that I know of.”¹⁴ His article is a critique of the movement, and his concluding statement could lead one to ascertain that this movement is purely a historical one. But Sonship rarely can be found as an organization, a term that would be anathema to its adherents. It is stronger now than it ever was, and it is woven throughout the fabric of most of modern day Pentecostalism. Ministry after ministry continues, as well as contributes to, that weaving process. Copeland’s theology of dominion, the deification of humanity, the complete role of a chosen church in restoring all creation back to divine order, clearly exhibits that Sonship has found a modern voice. And in conjunction with the legacy of Kenneth Hagin, Sr., these two modern day heralds of Sonship ideals have, perhaps without knowing it, carried on the essence of men like Bill Britton, Sam Fife, George Hawtin [widely regarded as one of the fathers of the Latter Rain Movement], and a host of other early Sonship proponents.

It has been maintained that the Sonship message comes in modern times veiled in many sizes, shapes, and forms. Quite often, the message will be linked to other areas of importance, as with the Word of Faith group. However, there are some who are very

¹⁴Bill Randles, “Weighed and Found Wanting,” Chapter 4, *The Latter Rain and Manifested Sons of God*. <http://www.believersin grace.com/images/WFW1.PDF>, p.36. 1995 (accessed July, 2005).

bold about what they are proclaiming, and there is little room, if any, for doubt as to what they are implying. Bishop Earl Paulk of Atlanta, Georgia, certainly falls into that category.

Like nearly every ministry that follows these controversial doctrinal paths, the minister himself becomes controversial. Bishop Paulk is no exception, and no stranger to controversy. He is the pastor of Chapel Hill Harvester Church in Atlanta, with a parish membership of nearly 25,000, 25 full time pastors, and a variety of outreaches to help meet the needs of the Body of Christ. This is a mega-church in every sense of the word, and its influence within the Atlanta area, as well as the nation, is enormous.

In many ways, Bishop Paulk is a spiritual anomaly. He openly and willingly proclaims his allegiance to the “Kingdom message,” and talks about the Manifested Sons of God without hesitation. And yet, he has been able to steadily oversee a vibrant, growing, and powerful church. He is also well educated. He graduated from the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and holds doctorates in both Theology and Divinity. He wears a clerical collar, is recognized as Bishop [He is the bishop of The International Communion of Charismatic Churches] and holds a “Charismatic Mass” every Sunday in his church before the morning worship service. His educational background leads him into ecumenical circles, and he regularly presides at high, formal types of church services, and heavily leans toward the belief in transubstantiation. He serves on local commissions in Atlanta for the upholding of civil rights for all minorities. He played an active role in Dr. Martin Luther King’s activities in the 1960s for integration of Georgia schools and businesses. In short, on the surface, he reflects everything that early Sonship adherents feared and attempted to avoid at all cost. They would have had a long, daunting struggle trying to understand Earl Paulk. And yet, his message would so

resonate with the majority of them, that it is not an outrageous supposition to say that he would have been more than welcome in many of their 1950s pulpits. As mentioned, Bishop Paulk lays out his theology in unvarnished terms. He is Sonship's ambassador all the way.

His affinity with the Sonship message is complete. He declares that God has certain, unmistakable purposes for the end-time church. Like Sonship teachers before him, he maintains that the rapture message, which a large segment of the Christian church proclaims, is a misconception, predicated on a misunderstanding of the Word of God.

According to Paulk:

Many Christian leaders across denominational and doctrinal lines agree that we are in "the season" of Christ's second coming. Unfortunately, too few Christians realize that this event will never occur until the Bride of Christ grows to maturity. The church's lack of preparation perpetuates a heartbreaking delay for generations. We wrestle daily in a cruel world of wars, famine, murder, deformity, dying children, drugs, horrible disease without cures, broken homes, hopelessness and despair. Saints in both heaven and earth travail, crying, How long? How long? But in their sincere questions, too many Christians settle for silence by looking into the heavens and waiting for God to do something. They fold their hands and sing about mansions in the sky with resignation, or they tell themselves that Jesus could come any second to end all their problems. The text of this book focuses on the Bride's mandatory preparation for a move of God that will culminate history.¹⁵

According to Paulk, the church itself must accept its responsibility in the second coming of Christ. Paulk continues the Sonship vision of the primary purpose of the church as the extension of God on the earth to finish the work that Christ began. He sees God's chosen ones as a continuation of the incarnation of God. Echoing Sonship teachers of past

¹⁵Bishop Earl Paulk, *Held in the Heavens Until: God's Strategy for Planet Earth* (Atlanta: K Dimension Publishers, 1985), p. 8 of Introduction.

generations, Paulk maintains that Jesus was the firstborn among many brethren, but without the ongoing harvest, the incarnation will never be complete.¹⁶

The living Word of God, Jesus Christ, was conceived in the womb of the virgin. The Word became flesh in the God-Man Jesus Christ. Likewise, the Word of God must be made flesh in the Church in order for us to bear witness of the Kingdom which God has called us to demonstrate.¹⁷

From his eschatological views to his views regarding God's purposes within the end-time church, Sonship has found a powerful platform for its doctrines, given the fact that Harvester Church is such a huge part of Atlanta's Christian community and Bishop Paulk regularly appears on TBN [Trinity Broadcasting Network], where his views are eagerly welcomed, and other satellite networks nationwide. He is the author of a score of books, and he is a featured speaker at many of America's other mega churches. Being the Bishop of The International Communion of Charismatic Churches, he is involved in the oversight of many churches, directly or indirectly influenced by the ministry of Chapel Hill Harvester Church. All of this, of course, adds up to an enormous stage from where vast streams of Sonship thinking permeate an innumerable amount of America's Christian communities.

¹⁶Paulk, *Held in the Heavens...*, p. 43.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 60

CHAPTER VI

MOVEMENTS AS HERALDS

Sonship has found a vast assortment of messengers who have carried its message throughout the United States and into many nations of the world. Men and women, on a daily basis, continue to liberally water the seeds of this teaching that sprang from the Latter Rain phenomenon, and its roots go deep into the soil of American Christianity. There is little doubt that numerous ministries have been affected by its philosophies. Entire movements or fellowships have heeded its call and become major instruments for its dissemination.

It is hard to discuss the role that men like Kenneth Hagin, Sr., Kenneth Copeland, and others play in advancing Sonship's teachings without regularly referring to the Word of Faith movement. To be sure, the Word of Faith movement has been instrumental in propagating Sonship. But in considering modern movements as a vehicle for spreading Sonship principles, the Vineyard churches are where one should begin. The reason for that is the stature, influence, and legacy of the man who steered the movement to prominence, the late John Wimber.

John Wimber came to the faith in 1962 in the midst of a family crisis. Though enjoying a successful musical career as a keyboardist for the popular singing group, *The Righteous Brothers*, his marriage was on the verge of collapse. Separated from his wife, and despondent over the direction his life was headed, he heeded the advice of a friend to seek God for some answers. He retreated for a time into the desert seeking divine help, and upon returning to his motel, discovered a message from his wife that she sought reconciliation. They enrolled in a Bible study at a Quaker church, and shortly thereafter,

John and his wife were converted through a personal experience they encountered while praying at home.

The 1970s saw two turning points in Wimber's life. The first was that he began pastoring a Quaker church, which he left in the mid 70s to take a position at Fuller Seminary as a lecturer in their Church Growth Institute. This position demanded that he do some extensive traveling, and it afforded him the opportunity to observe and experience many facets and expressions of the Body of Christ. It was in this position that he met C. Peter Wagner, a fellow professor at Fuller, and recognized as one of the leaders of the church growth movement. Wagner became a strong influence on Wimber's life, as Wimber would on his as time passed. Wagner, who had been a missionary to Bolivia, regaled Wimber with stories of miraculous healings, demonic activity, and tales of the supernatural. He was also made aware of the tremendous church growth that was happening in third-world countries. Up to this point, Wimber had been a cessationist [one who held the belief that miracles, the gifts of the Spirit, etc. had ceased]. Wimber began to reconsider his theological positions.

In 1977, he left Fuller to put into practice the new concepts and approaches regarding evangelism and church growth. He started a Bible study in his home, which quickly grew to 50 people, and eventually mushroomed to over 600 people. The Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Anaheim came into being. Initially, Wimber had worked under the auspices of Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel movement, but eventually broke off and joined forces with seven congregations that had left Calvary, the Vineyard Fellowships, which at the time was under the leadership of Ken Gullickson. In the early 1980s, Gullickson turned over the leadership to Wimber. In 1981, an event happened at Wimber's Anaheim church that was destined to completely change the course of his

ministry, and to alter the course that the Vineyard Fellowships would follow. The following account is related by Wimber's wife, Carol:

On Mother's Day of 1981, we had a watershed experience that launched us into what today is called "Power Evangelism." At this time, John invited a young man who had been attending our church to preach one Sunday evening. By now, we had grown to over 700 participants. The young man shared his testimony, which was beautiful and stirring; then asked for all the people under the age of 25 to come forward. None of us had a clue as to what was going to happen. When they got to the front, the speaker said, "For years now, the Holy Spirit has been grieved by the church, but He's getting over it. Come, Holy Spirit." And he came. Most of the young people had grown up around our home. We had four children between the ages of 15-21. We knew the young people well. One fellow, Tim, started bouncing. His arms flung out and he fell over, but one of his hands accidentally hit a mike stand and he took it down with him. He was tangled up in the cord with the mike next to his mouth. He began speaking in tongues, so the sound went throughout the gymnasium. We had never considered ourselves charismatics, and certainly had never placed emphasis on the gift of tongues. We had seen a few people tremble and fall over before, and we had seen many healings. But, this was different. The majority of the young people were shaking and falling over. At one point it looked like a battlefield scene, bodies everywhere, people weeping, wailing, speaking in tongues. And Tim in the middle of it all, babbling into the microphone. There was much shouting and loud behavior. John sat quietly playing the piano and wide eyed! Members of our staff were fearful and angry. Several people walked out...But I knew God was visiting us. I was so thrilled because I had been praying for power for so long. This might not have been the way I wanted to see it come, but this was how God gave it to us...I asked one boy, who was on the floor, "What's happening to you right now?" He said, "It's like electricity. I can't move." I was amazed by the affect of God's power on the human body. I suppose I thought that it would be all inward work, such as a conviction or repentance. I never imagined there would be strong physical manifestations.¹

Though John Wimber was not as eager to endorse this new "visitation" as his wife, he quickly passed through a time of soul searching and settled it in his mind and heart that it was of God. His course was charted.

¹Kevin Springer, Editor, "Carol Wimber, A Hunger For God." *Power Encounters*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

The early 1980s saw Wimber back at Fuller, where he began teaching a class titled “Signs and Wonders and Church Growth.” For ten consecutive Monday evenings, the class met for four hours. The first three hours were given to lectures and discussion, and the last hour was a practical application of all they were learning with students and faculty praying one for another, employing spiritual gifts, and practicing the “things” of the Spirit. It was an extremely popular class, especially given the fact that Fuller was not a Charismatic school, and neither were most of the students. They were Evangelical in theology and background, but hungry for deeper things of God [a group that C. Peter Wagner came to identify as the Third Wave - Classical Pentecostals represented the First Wave; Charismatics comprised a Second Wave; and these Evangelicals who were finding spiritual manifestations were the Third].² These classes, along with the continued spiritual happenings taking place at the Anaheim Vineyard, were fertile ground for Wimber to develop his concepts of Power Evangelism, and Proclamation and Demonstration Evangelism. Wimber’s linking of successful evangelism with signs and wonders and the manifestations of the Spirit not only evolved from his association with Wagner and the Power Evangelism classes he was teaching at Fuller, but the linkage was also the result of his being influenced by the theological works of long time Fuller professor George Eldon Ladd. Wimber writes:

I was already acquainted with George Eldon Ladd’s writings [he was a Fuller Theological Seminary Professor], but it was not until I read his book *Jesus And the Kingdom* that I realized his work on the kingdom formed a theological basis for Power Evangelism. As I read Dr. Ladd’s books, and read afresh the gospel accounts, I became convinced that power evangelism was for today.³

² C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Vine Books, 1988), p. 25.

³ John Wimber & Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 12.

Within his faith journey, Wimber had taken enormous steps toward the development of a “Kingdom Now/Sonship” emphasis in his theology. The concept of Power Evangelism easily dovetails with Sonship’s doctrinal vision of the Body of Christ being mobilized in the last days by a special visitation, or empowerment of the Spirit, in order to do authoritative deliverance ministry. Ladd’s theological works offered Wimber the intellectual context for the basis of what he had been envisioning for Christ’s latter day church.

George Eldon Ladd was converted at the age of 18 under the preaching ministry of a woman graduate of Moody Bible Institute. He graduated from Gordon College, and was ordained a Northern Baptist minister. He did graduate studies at Boston College, and earned his Ph.D. at Harvard. Ladd joined Fuller’s faculty in 1950, and was an Evangelical New Testament professor for 30 years. He was the author of several significant works, one entitled *Jesus and the Kingdom* (1964)⁴, later republished as *The Presence of the Future* (1974).⁵ This work, though finding acceptance and acclaim from within much of evangelicalism, was a target for sharp criticism from without.

The bulk of the criticism leveled at Ladd’s book claimed that he erroneously interpreted the meaning of what scripture teaches regarding the Kingdom of God, and that his conclusions about the nature and meaning of the Kingdom of God deviated from actual biblical truth. Where Ladd was believed to be going astray theologically on this subject was his deduction that the benefits, blessings, and unlimited power of the Kingdom of God is for the present as much as it is a promise of tomorrow. For him, there was no distinction. The Kingdom, according to Ladd, is fundamentally God’s

⁴George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964).

⁵Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974).

sovereign reign, as it is expressed throughout redemptive history. Ladd took this definition further to include interpreting New Testament occurrences of the word “kingdom” to mean “reign” or “rule,” and then to interpret “rule” as “power.” It was not a big leap to then equate “the Kingdom of God” to simply mean the power of the Holy Spirit to work “signs and wonders.” From the biblical text in Hebrews 6:5 that indicates that we can taste of the powers of the world to come in this life, Ladd reasoned that since we can have a foretaste in the now of the power to come, we certainly can also experience in a measure now, in this time, the kingdom which is also to come.⁶

Wimber accepted Ladd’s premises, and coupled with his vision of Power Evangelism, he, and likewise the Vineyard Fellowships, became a potent, influential representative of Kingdom Now principles. Wimber remarks that “his first book, *Power Evangelism*, could just as well have been called *Kingdom Evangelism*, for its foundational premise is that the Kingdom of God has come in Christ, and that every Christian is called to preach and demonstrate the kingdom today.”⁷

Wimber’s insistence on a Kingdom Now experience as a model of ministry for the Body of Christ is a reflection not only of Ladd’s influence, but it is also a hallmark of one of Sonship’s guiding themes. At the core of Sonship thought is the emphasis for the church to cease being too futuristic in its ideas regarding God’s purposes for humanity, especially the concept of the Kingdom of God, and to wake up to the fact that God’s purposes and plan for the ages are for the here and now. Wimber, as well as almost all who follow the path of Kingdom Now theology, adamantly make this point. He

⁶ Widrig, Carl Jr., “The Kingdom of God According to George Eldon Ladd,” *Doctrine of the Kingdom of God*.”Appendix A. www.geocities.com/hebrews928/ladd.html?20057 (accessed May 29, 2006).

⁷John Wimber, *Kingdom Evangelism: Proclaiming the Gospel with Power* (Anaheim, California: Vineyard Ministries International, 1984), p. 17.

maintains that Jesus and the disciples did not consign the Kingdom of God exclusively to a future millennium, but that Jesus actually began His public ministry by announcing the presence of the Kingdom of God, and regularly reminding his followers through parables and acts of power many details and attributes of the kingdom. Wimber uses the phrase “It is borrowing from tomorrow today.”⁸

Firmly within the “Kingdom Now” camp, he and his ministering teams crossed the United States, and much of the world holding conferences and seminars. Church leaders of every persuasion were invited to these events, where they heard strong sermons and admonitions that the Kingdom of God is here now and is a kingdom of power, signs, and wonders for the church to demonstrate now. These meetings had enormous effect on many pastors, and churches. In many cases, new Vineyard churches were established, even if the name was not always changed to reflect that. At a Vineyard pastors’ conference, Wimber taught on ten essential areas of ministry for a Vineyard church. These, according to Wimber, were the common denominators that identified the family of Vineyard congregations and called them, “The Vineyard Genetic Code.”⁹

Locked within that code is a like-minded philosophy of ministry that would easily find harmony within the majority of Sonship churches and fellowships. These “ministry genes,” that came into being during the Latter Rain Movement, have been passed on from various ministry to ministry, and their pronounced characteristics are evident within the strain of ministry that has become the distinguishing traits of Vineyard Fellowships.

⁸Wimber, *Kingdom Evangelism: Proclaiming the Gospel with Power*, p. 18.

⁹ John Wimber, Sermon “*The Vineyard Genetic Code*,” Anaheim, California Pastors’ Conference, September, 1992. www.vineyardusa.org/about/history.aspx (accessed May 30, 2006).

Today there are over 850 Vineyard Fellowships worldwide, a publishing house, and a music production company that continue the legacy of John Wimber's Kingdom Now theology, and serve as a means for nurturing and growing the seeds of Sonship.

By the 1980s, the stream of Sonship concepts were abundant within Wimber's ministry and the Vineyard Fellowships. A number of factors and people served to help steer John in that direction. However, in the mid to late 1980s, he crossed paths with the Kansas City Fellowship. An unique ministry deeply influenced by Sonship principles. The Kansas City Fellowship (KCF), whose leaders were known as the Kansas City Prophets, and affiliated with John Wimber and the Vineyard, and became known as the Metro Vineyard of Kansas City. KCF was founded by Mike Bickle in 1984. The church quickly grew, and in 1986, he and his elders formed Grace Ministries, which they described as "a ministry team of men committed to seeing the church fully restored to the glory described in God's Word."¹⁰ Grace Ministries represents several facets of the KCF's ministry. For example, Shiloh Ministries was for the development of a prophetic community. A piece of land was designated and developed, where prophets could live together, convene prophetic conferences, share their insights, and train other prophets. The senior prophetic authority recognized over Shiloh was Paul Cain, a former associate of William Branham. A branch of Grace Ministries fostered a type of ecumenism, and sought to unite as many churches as possible. Along with Bickle and Cain, Bob Jones served within KCF in a prophetic capacity. KCF was a place where the supernatural was not just encouraged, but extraordinary occurrences seemed to be the order of the day,

¹⁰Bill Randles, *Weighed and Found Wanting* (Marion, Iowa: 1995), p. 21.

especially among Paul Cain and Bob Jones. The supernatural experiences, mystical encounters, and countless prophecies that flowed out of the KCF challenges one to find a scriptural context for much of their activity. However, the message that the KCF advocated is just as significant.

Bob Jones, like nearly everyone associated with KCF, lives in the realm of controversy. Noted as the “seer” among the group, he regularly reported angelic visitations and out of body experiences. He insists that every year on the Day of Atonement, God stands before him and chats face to face.¹¹ This is but one example of the extreme mystical happenings that have made KCF so controversial. Jones’ preaching was rooted in a stream of thought that was pure Sonship in its origins, which was not only readily affirmed by the rest of the KCF’s leadership but was also replicated within their ministries. At the heart of Jones’ message was the concept of the “New Breed,” or “New Seed” idea. These will be last day Overcomers, with a powerful and unique ministry, fashioned after Jesus’ earthly ministry. They will move in signs and wonders just like Jesus did, and will be just like Christ. These will be the Manifested Sons of God who will even eventually put death under their feet. The seeds of Sonship had found fertile ground within the KCF.

Paul Cain was also a central figure who exercised enormous influence over the KCF, and later was to do so within the Vineyard fellowships. Like Jones, Cain’s life is one of countless supernatural experiences. For Cain, it is reported to have started at birth. While pregnant with Paul, his mother was said to have been at the brink of death from various physical maladies, cancer and heart disease among them. A being, who she was

¹¹K. B. Napier, *Bible Theology Ministries Articles*, “The Kansas City Prophets,” (Swansea, Wales: Bible Theology Ministries, 1996), p. 3.

convinced was the Angel of the Lord, appeared to her with the message to be of good cheer, for she would live, and her son was to be called Paul for he would preach like the Apostle Paul. At age eight, Cain relates that the Angel of the Lord visited him, also, confirming his calling.

In 1947, Cain was swept up in the beginnings of the Latter Rain and healing revival. He eventually swung his allegiance to the full thrust of Latter Rain's doctrines, being heavily influenced by William Branham, within whom Cain found a kindred spirit for his mysticism. Following a life of celibacy, which he claimed was a direct command to him from God, Cain continued his ministry into the 1950s, before dropping away from ministry for over 25 years. This period of silence seems to be a mystery, but Cain reports that during that time God kept telling him that when he re-emerged, he would stand before a new breed of people. When Cain eventually stepped back into ministry, he began an ardent search for that "new breed" of men. Cain relates that he searched everywhere, going overseas meeting prominent church leaders such as Paul Yonggi Cho of Seoul, Korea, and likewise engaging with well-known Christian leaders within the United States. But he could not seem to find that "new breed," until he met Wimber.

Cain exploded back on the scene with not only an amazing display of the prophetic gift, but a fresh zeal to proclaim the truths and vision that he was convinced were resident within Sonship:

You know this message is 35 years old and I'm just preaching it again. Thank God I've found somebody to preach it to. I told you about the vision, what I've had...See, I've been wanting to share this so long and find somebody—how would you like to have something on the back burner for 35 years and nobody had any—boy this is, I mean this isn't leftovers. I mean this has been hot with me all these years, but everywhere I tried to preach it, they cooked my

goose. Don't you boo me. This kind of fiery preaching is a lost art today except in a very mild degree.¹²

Wimber became enamored by the ministry teams from KCP, and especially with Cain.

At an August, 1989 conference in Denver, Colorado, Wimber called on Vineyard pastors to receive their ministry:

I think you'll find that the prophets are pretty nice people by and large, I've come to know several of them here, I think maybe 5 or 6, that are from The Kansas City Fellowship. And then we have Paul Cain who lives in Dallas and has had quite a relationship with Kansas City for a number of years, but is not, evidently, technically, considered a Kansas City Prophet. You'll hear from them, some this week, although they won't be largely behind the scenes. They've already ministered significantly this weekend. And it's my hope that every one of you, if you've not today had the occasion of sitting down with one or two of them and having them minister to you, that will happen before the week is over. Because I believe in God's providence you'll be blessed and you'll go home with your pockets full and your heart singing, if they do.¹³

Wimber sanctioned this strong, modern remnant of the Sonship Movement, eventually assimilating the KCF into the Vineyard fellowship of churches. Wimber, who had already made the journey to a Kingdom Now theology rooted in Sonship ideals, had now taken the plunge fully in the doctrinal direction that the Latter Rain Movement initiated 40 years earlier. And with Wimber's concurrence and stamp of approval upon the KCF's ministers, many Vineyard churches, as well, became receptacles for Sonship theology. Given the fact that the Vineyard fellowship continues to be one of the fastest growing organizations within evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, the role it continues to play in advancing the legacy of Wimber's Kingdom Now theology is significant. It has, indeed, become a powerful vehicle for the continuation of Sonship.

¹² Let Us Reason Ministries. "Prophet Paul Cain," p.5. [www.//letusreason.org/Latrain5.htm](http://letusreason.org/Latrain5.htm) (accessed May 19, 2005).

¹³ John Wimber, "Unpack Your Bags," Audio Tape, Denver Vineyard Conference, 1989.

CHAPTER VII

TECHNOLOGICAL HERALDS

As one views how the Sonship message has not only survived, but burgeoned to the point where its characteristics and core messages are abounding within a multitude of modern ministries and movements, one is struck by a common denominator. The fertile ground where Sonship continues to be nurtured and espoused is primarily the domain of modern Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism, almost exclusively, is the bearer of this message. That is an important element for consideration when one takes into account the following facts.

In the last years of the twentieth century, there have been major developments and trends within world Christianity that can not be ignored. According to Vinson Synan,

The fastest growing denominations in the world are those associated with the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement. The largest family of Protestants in the world are those known today as the denominational Pentecostals. The five largest Protestant congregations in the world are Pentecostal churches. Practically every congregation of all denominations has some members who identify with the charismatic movement. The leading popular preachers in the “electronic church” are well known Pentecostal-charismatic figures such as Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and the “700 Club,” and Paul Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). The largest evangelistic crusades in Christian history are now being conducted by the German Pentecostal evangelist, Reinhard Bonnke, in Africa. Attendance at some crusades has exceeded 500,000 persons in one service. In 1990, Bonnke purchased a sound system capable of addressing 1,000,000 people at a time. He expects to reach this attendance milestone in the near future.¹

Synan’s report attests to the power and momentum with which Pentecostalism continues to sweep throughout the world. Like a mighty wind, it blows everywhere, affecting change, breathing new life into churches and individual lives in desperate need of renewal, raising up new churches, and carrying the seeds of Sonship and depositing them

¹Vinson Synan, *In the Latter Days: The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Twentieth Century* (Fairfax, Virginia: Xulon Press, 2001), p. 23-24.

wherever it goes. Pentecostal ministries and movements have been doing it since its inception.

Embedded within Synan's report is the reminder of an important dynamic when considering the power and influence of a message to further Sonship principles. The age we live in has seen the rise of a powerful and effective mode of ministry for the dissemination of a message that it is without parallel in the history of humankind. Synan calls it the "electronic church." Literally, at the touch of some buttons, at the speed of light, powerful preaching and church services are beamed around the entire world 24-hours a day, every day of the year via powerful broadcasting stations and state of the art satellite communications. A plethora of Christian ministries and personalities daily make their way into millions of homes, especially in the developing world. The two largest of these electronic marvels are the "700 Club," under the direction of Pat Robertson, and Trinity Broadcasting Network [TBN], hosted by Paul and Jan Crouch. Though both of these Christian telecasters sail under the banner of Pentecostalism/Charismatics, a scrutiny of their messages and philosophies of ministry reveals that these two "mega-churches of the air" are, perhaps at times inadvertently, also huge instruments for the furtherance of Sonship thought.

As previously mentioned, Sonship thrives under various titles, terms, and labels. It has been packaged, then repackaged, and presented as various kinds of teachings and emphasis by a vast host of ministries and teachers. Yet, the ultimate message that is synonymous with Sonship can be summed up in two words that have come to describe a type of theology that has emerged within relative modern times: Dominionism and Kingdom Now. However it is packaged, at its heart are the concepts introduced by

Sonship. And those two messages are a large part of the stream of thought that flows from the many voices of Paul Crouch's TBN.

Paul Crouch was born in 1934, the son of Pentecostal missionaries. As a child, he displayed an interest in amateur radios, and, it is reported that at an early age he announced that he would someday use technology to send the gospel around the world. He attended the Central Bible Institute in Springfield, Missouri. In the early 1950s, he worked for the Assemblies of God as a film librarian. He married his wife, Jan, in 1958. In 1961, he was hired to run the Assemblies of God's broadcast production facility in Burbank, California. From there, he left to start TBN in 1973. He claims that it was a vision from God in 1975 that led him to begin satellite transmissions. TBN recently celebrated obtaining its 1000th station.

TBN programming features a host of Christian teachers and leaders. Paul Crouch, an able orator and highly charismatic figure in his own right, actually does little of the preaching, leaving that up to the various guests who recurrently appear on his programs. Crouch functions like more of a master of ceremonies. One can find every variety and style of ministry gracing the stage of TBN. From the subdued, quiet teacher to the flamboyant, energetic style of T. D. Jakes, TBN offers the whole spectrum. It is hard to imagine a prominent, influential Christian leader, as well as a vast number of movie stars and other highly visible, Christian personages from the Hollywood community, who has not appeared on the program. With all the different personalities and ministries highlighted, it is no surprise that an immense assortment of doctrinal themes are espoused. However, it does not take a close examination or analysis to conclude that the overwhelming majority of the voices that sound forth from TBN are those who represent the Word of Faith, Seed Faith, Dominion, and Kingdom Now theologies. And as their

messages go forth, it takes with it the kernels of Sonship teachings and deposits them all over the world. Every Christian community and household that is a zealous follower of the TBN Network has drunk, in a measure, at one time or another, from the streams of Sonship. With the help of modern technology, Sonship has permeated into areas of which its originators could have only dreamed.

Though Paul Crouch maintains a somewhat low profile when it comes to preaching and teaching the Word. When he does, his views have clearly shown that his doctrinal leanings are easily compatible with the Word of Faith, Seed Faith, and Kingdom Now Movements. A statement he made on a *Praise The Lord* show reveals his affinity with these groups:

He [God] doesn't draw a distinction between Himself and us... You know that's settled, then, tonight? This hue and cry and controversy that has been spawned by the Devil to try and bring dissension within the body of Christ that we are gods! I am a little god... I have His name. I'm one with Him. I'm in covenant relationship. I am a little god. Critics be gone.²

Another example of this is Crouch's efforts to defend Seed Faith and Kingdom Now teachings. He recently reinforced that position in his February, 2003 Newsletter by writing:

I have a word of blessing, a word of admonition, and a word of rebuke to many in the body of Christ today! You had better buckle up because some are going to love this word and some are going to hate it! But before we are done, hell will be thrown into further disarray and Satan will be exposed for the filthy liar that he is. The one that really got my goat (pardon the Missouri in me) was a dear brother on *Praise The Lord* a few weeks ago. YES, on OUR TBN! I was down in Florida and the program was on tape. It had been LIVE. I would have called the engineer to take it off the air. This dear brother was waxing eloquent on the "error" of giving to God and expecting anything in return. In about 15 minutes, he totally trashed everything Oral Roberts has taught us on "Seed Faith" for over 40 years! The great messages by R.W. Schambach, John Avanzini, Dad Hagin, Benny Hinn, John Hagee, Rod Parsley, T.D. Jakes, and a host of others, flushed right down the

²Paul Crouch, *Praise the Lord*, Anaheim, California, July 7, 1986.

drain! So why do the heretic hunters and other critics trash the “seed faith message?” I will tell you why. And here is the bottom line for this whole letter. They are either ignorant of the Word, or bound by their traditions, OR, and this is frightening, some are, I believe, of their father the Devil. He will inspire the heretic hunters to use their traditions to keep us poor, sick, discouraged and deceived-the mask is OFF. We see clearly the subtle deceptive tactics of the evil one! Let’s keep taking the wealth of the world!³

Within Crouch’s rebuke, there is a list of ministries who are regulars on his program, and nearly all of them are noted Word of Faith and Kingdom Now teachers. He is not only quick to defend one of the Word of Faith’s dominant concepts, but when Kingdom Now theology comes under scrutiny, he is just as protective. Hal Lindsey, who has had a long association with the Crouches, going back to their earliest days, used to openly confront what he perceived as false teaching on the air. Lindsey had problems with the teachings of well-known Kingdom Now advocate, Bishop Paulk. Crouch actually allowed Lindsey to debate Paulk regarding these teachings back in 1980s. Crouch has since instructed Lindsay to stick to areas of agreement.⁴ Lindsey still maintains a program on TBN, but a disclaimer appears at the beginning of the program expressing the fact that the views of Lindsey’s program do not necessarily reflect TBN’s.

With the leader of TBN a clear advocate of Kingdom Now principles, it is not hard to understand that TBN itself is a significant tool for its propagation. It is also clear that Sonship has found an ally in modern technology.

Many claimed that Latter Rain and its affects had died out in the mid 1950s. The Sonship Movement that emerged from it was disparaged, persecuted, demonized, and given up for dead, but it has shown an astonishing resilience. A movement, whose adherents, at one time, were careful as to whom they admitted that to, is now one of the

³Jackie Alnor, “In Bed with TBN,” *The Christian Sentinel Report*, May 1, 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

most popular belief systems in America. With many of today's powerful and influential ministries and churches as its proponents, and the marvels of the electronic age as a base for the distribution of its philosophy, its death, that many prophesied would happen, may be long in coming.

In 1961, Pat Robertson launched the first all-religious television station in the country. Barely surviving the early 1960s, by 1968, however, Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) had built a new headquarters building and was in the early stages of a blossoming new format for presenting the gospel and reaching the world with its message.

Born in 1930 in Lexington, Virginia, Robertson is a graduate of Washington and Lee University. Holding advanced degrees from Yale Law School and New York Theological Seminary, Robertson is one of the more educated televangelists. He was converted in 1956, and later while in Seminary, met Harold Bredesen, a charismatic pastor of The Reformed Church in Mount Vernon, New York, where Robertson became acquainted with the earliest beginnings of the Charismatic Movement.

Robertson's approach to religious telecasting is quite different than Crouch's. Where Crouch operates at a lively pace and surrounds himself with flamboyant personalities, Robertson is more subdued and methodical in his presentation. He features commentaries on world events, and interacts with guests in a conversational manner. There is a political flavor to CBN's ministry, and Robertson himself is never far from the political arena, having made a run for the American Presidency in 1988. World events and political structures do not simply interest him, but much of his theological thrust is concerned with the "powers that be." He feels deeply that Christianity should make its presence felt within the marketplace. Robertson's approach to Kingdom Now theology is a practical one. Where TBN's Paul Crouch and the many ministries that appear on his

program advocate a Kingdom Now via the awesome demonstration of the Holy Spirit, and the subjugation of evil and demonic forces, Robertson sees the Kingdom Now influence growing and becoming dominant through visionary and determined men and women who have penetrated the power bases of this world, such as law, medicine, politics, education, and communications. This philosophical view was at the heart of his starting Regent University [originally called Christian Broadcasting Network University-CBNU] that now offers a fully accredited law school. Vinson Synan recalls,

In 1977, Pat Robertson founded CBNU, (now Regent) University on the CBN campus. Beginning with a graduate School of Communications, the university now also includes the graduate Schools of Education, Government, Counseling, Business, Divinity, Communications, Law, and the Center of Leadership Studies. Regent has been given full accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The stated mission of the university is to bring biblical truth to bear on every discipline in every area of life.⁵

Robertson, an ordained minister within the Southern Baptist tradition, made the transition to the Charismatic Movement in the latter part of the 1950s, and eventually adopted much of the belief system of Kingdom Now theology. Robertson's plunge into Kingdom Now theology began with what he described as his searching for answers to the seeming collapse of American morality and ethics. He was not only greatly affected by what he saw transpiring within America's culture, but was dismayed that the world, in general, seemed to be following destructive, unrestrained paths, with no remedy in sight. Robertson describes part of the experience that was a major impetus in his journey to Kingdom Now principles:

So great are our problems that to think of them as incurable is not unreasonable. Thoughtful men frequently compare the recent course of Western civilization with the collapse of the ancient Roman Empire. Everywhere, scholars, politicians, industrialists, financiers, sociologists, and futurists see grave trouble ahead. What went wrong? What

⁵Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic History* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 341.

happened to the hopes and aspirations of the pioneers? I, like other concerned people, had nothing but questions and no answers. Is our nation and world faced with collapse? Can we survive? Is our only choice between anarchy and dictatorship? Or is there a third alternative? More than any time in my life, I knew that night that we must urgently seek a third choice. I knew that we would have to reach into the invisible world that has been there all along, a world far truer than any civilization in history. We have wasted too much time, decades of decay and doubt. The challenges of my contemporaries rang in my ears: Is there truly an invisible world of the spirit? Is it possible to draw help from that invisible world? Can there be a new world order? Yes. The invisible world is better described as the Kingdom of God. It has principles, it can be learned. They and they alone can alter the world's slide into anarchy or dictatorship. They offer a third choice.⁶

During Robertson's scriptural searching shortly after this experience, he confirmed from an in-depth study that the message of the Kingdom Now was central to Jesus' teaching, and that the Kingdom was already here and at hand. For Robertson this was a revolutionary understanding.⁷ Like many if not most followers of Kingdom Now theology, he sees himself as having come upon some new, profound truth and insight of God's Word. However, Robertson's "new, revolutionary understanding" was a core belief that ran throughout Latter Rain doctrine, as well as one of the central tenets upon which Sonship thought was built. As mentioned, where most other proponents of this message begin by decrying the condition of the church, its deficiencies, and spiritual complacency, Robertson's focus is primarily trained on the need for cultural and societal reform. But the goal is the same, a present transformation of our society and world from the bondage of Satan's control to the eventual sovereign reign of God.

For Robertson, the answer to worldly chaos was for people to reach into the invisible world [God's Kingdom] and bring that invisible or secret kingdom into the visible. We

⁶Pat Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom: A Promise of Hope and Freedom in a World of Turmoil* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), p. 15.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 17.

do that by acting on the principles of God's Kingdom. When one acts on the principles of that invisible kingdom, all things are possible, and possibilities are endless because that world, unlike this natural one, is unlimited. Robertson is assertive in his view that this Kingdom authority is for the here and now. He writes:

Jesus declared in essence that the Kingdom is here, and I've come to open it to you and to show you how it works. It offers new possibilities for life that we long ago relegated to the musty, unused portions of our Bibles, thinking of them as those promises made for a future time, referred to as "the millennium." We will see that many of those conditions---those blessings we feared might turn out to be lofty Bible language that would pass us by-- can be experienced in large measure right now. For they exist in the kingdom now.⁸

Contained within Robertson's model of Kingdom Now theology is the possibility, or goal of complete transformation of the world into what he perceives is God's eventual plan for humankind. And contained within Robertson's model is the continuation, howbeit in another form or application, of the vision of Sonship.

CBN and TBN represent the two largest Christian broadcasting ministries in the world. Their audiences and influence are virtually incalculable. As their technology improves and advances, there will be no limits to the role they will play in shaping and directing the worldwide Christian community. And at the heart of much of their worship, message and understanding of the purposes of God within His body, are the ever present seeds of Sonship thinking.

⁸Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom*, p. 45.

CHAPTER VIII

MUSIC AS A HERALD

There is little doubt that the means for presenting the gospel have undergone revolutionary changes. Many are troubled by the new ways that the gospel is packaged and shipped around the world. And there are those, as with any debate, who come down on the other end of the spectrum and wholeheartedly embrace just about any method that can be utilized for the furtherance of the gospel. For them, the end almost always justifies the means. The controversies continue to rage.

Perhaps, nothing, however, succeeds in stirring controversy in this matter like the subject of Contemporary Christian music. On a *Focus on the Family* segment, Dr. James Dobson, related that “over the years, this program and ministry have dealt with the “hottest” topics in our culture, from homosexuality, abortion, gay marriages, teen sexual problems, etc., but no topic generated more phone calls to *Focus on the Family* like the program that featured the pros and cons of Contemporary Christian music’s role in the worship life of the church.”¹ The subject of what type of music is best suited for the church’s worship can be divisive. Often Contemporary Christian music is seen as being more of a display of entertainment, where the emphasis that should be on Christ is lost. There is the worry that this kind of music, in its efforts to appeal to a larger audience, has fallen prey to much of secularism’s negative influence. Emerging from the Jesus People Movement of the late 60s, this music offered an open expression of a generation’s love and affection for Jesus Christ. The Jesus People themselves did much to shake up the existing church establishment with their appearance and bold witness for the Lord, but

¹James Dobson, *Focus on the Family*, Radio Ministry, “The Church’s Music,” August, 2003.

their music created huge waves of backlash as they challenged deep seated, conventional modes of music and worship.

Musical sound and rhythm can lift or soothe our spirits. That is but one of its powerful abilities. It must always be remembered that music is also a vehicle for a message. Much of today's contemporary Christian music does, indeed, focus on worship themes and a "feel good" type of emphasis. But many contemporary worship songs and choruses carry a strong, definitive theological message, and when presented within the context of well played instruments, well orchestrated sound effects, and vocals, the message of the songs is finding popularity and affecting an influence within countless lives.

Ken Medema, a well-known Christian musician, composer and performer who has ministered to the church for over 30 years, offered several insights on this subject in a recent interview in *Homiletics*. Medema articulates the power of music to generate and change one's emotions, but underscores the fact that music, primarily, should be a means of presenting a message:

Given the stuff that I do, given the kind of preparation that we make when I do a song or concert, it really is an exercise in theologizing and it's an excuse in developing a hermeneutic and playing with it. For me it's not enough just to have nice music. I look at the great hymns that I grew up with. They are mini-sermons in themselves. They are theological statements, are they not? And Jane and I have always wanted to build whatever we do on that kind of model, whether it's one piece or an entire concert, it needs to be a kind of theological statement - a sermon if you will.²

Medema stresses the need for music to convey a distinct, effective message, and that its orientation should be to be simply another form of the Word going forth. He highlights further:

²Ken Medema, Interview with *Homiletics*, 10 August 2004.

The church has got too much music in it right now. The church is obsessed with music. The church has this false idea that if you have the right kind of music you will bring the people in, you will suck them in! And that came right out of the 14th and 15th centuries when the church was doing organ pieces, as interludes between chants. If you church had a big new organ, you'd draw the people. We do these music shows to draw people in, and we call it worship, and what it is is just emotional manipulation. Too much music in the church.³

Medema understands music's power to move and manipulate emotions. After graduating from College, he worked in various hospitals as a music therapist, using his considerable musical talents to help the emotionally and mentally challenged.

Many messages are finding their way into the hearts of the Christian community through the explosion of diverse forms of Christian music. There may be numerous times when a person does not readily remember last Sunday's sermon, but they will often continue singing the simply constructed worship chorus that had been sung. And within this powerful medium, the sounds of Sonship can be heard in many of its arrangements.

In the late 1960's, Bill Britton's House of Prayer published its own songbook of worship choruses, and, as one would expect, they all carry the theme of Sonship/Kingdom Now. Two selections illustrate this, the first entitled: *Now is Time to Take the Kingdom*.

Now is the time to take the kingdom
 Rise up ye strong, Tis Christ's command.
 For every power and dominion
 Is given now into your hand.
 Ye that have ears to hear the trumpet
 Ye that have hearts to understand
 Now is the time to take the kingdom
 Rise up ye strong, possess the land.⁴

³Ibid., p. 2.

⁴*Songs for Eagle Saints*, "Now is the Time to Take the Kingdom," Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, [n.d.], p. 13.

The Sonship themes of taking the kingdom, possessing the land, knowing that power and dominion has been given, and an ability to clearly hear the message are all emphasized in the song. The second song, *Come up a Little Higher*, is another example of how the message is conveyed through worship:

Come up a little higher, Come up a little higher
Come up a little higher in the Lord
Waters clear are flowing, secrets he is showing
Come up a little higher in the Lord.

Rise up a little higher, Rise up a little higher
Rise up a little higher in the Lord
An Army he's selected, doubters he rejected
Rise up a little higher in the Lord

Stand up and be counted, Stand up a be counted
Stand up and be counted for the Lord
Choose ye the winner's side, and turn the battle's tide
With Christ our captain and our Lord.

Forward in the battle, Forward in the battle
Forward in the battle we must go.
Gird with Godly power, issued for this hour
Overcoming daily every foe.⁵

This particular song could well be called Sonship's anthem, for contained within its lyrics are strong markers as to what Sonship espouses. The invitation to rise higher in God, the fact that there are secrets of the Lord for the taking, the army and overcoming concept, and the empowering for the present all out battle is unmistakably Sonship language. The *Songs for Eagle Saints* songbook contains 108 choruses, and every one of them follows Sonship's doctrinal path. Because Britton's primary format of sending forth the Sonship message was the printed page, these books were soon in the hands of multitudes of Sonship fellowships around the world that regularly used them in their worship services.

⁵*Songs for Eagle Saints*, p. 3.

Music was a powerful and persuasive tool within the Sonship Movement to advance its message. And as Britton's popularity came to the forefront in the late 1960s, and his ministry started finding inroads within the Charismatic movement, the Sonship message in song began to spread through much of classical Pentecostalism, as well as in mainline and evangelical churches who were discovering the Charismatic experience.

These Sonship themes would, of course, be expected to be found within a church that was fully enmeshed in that message. However, those same themes can readily be found within a large segment of contemporary praise and worship choruses and songs. Just as the message of Sonship has never ceased being declared from numerous pulpits, it is still alive within much of today's modern worship.

A popular contemporary church group, *Supertones*, declares in their song *The Kingdom*:

I tell you the truth when I say that the Kingdom is on the way, on the way.
 I tell you the truth when I say that the Kingdom is here today, here today.
 It's getting closer to fulfillment - But the kingdom began with Advent
 He is reigning through his people, the first will be nothing to the sequel.
 No more war, no more crime, no more unemployment line.
 Christ is on His seat where mercy, truth, and justice meet.⁶

This is but one example of a large body of music that affirms the centrality of Sonship's proposition that the power and dominion of the Kingdom of God are in the present, and it will continue to grow and spread until it reigns over all. This theme is not only popular within the works of many noted Christian musicians and songwriters, but the evolvment of worship choruses as the main mode of worship expression within the majority of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches [and in many evangelical churches] is also a huge

⁶Supertones, "The Kingdom," *Revenge of the O.C. Supertones*, (Bec Recordings/Emd, 2004).

vehicle for Sonship thinking. Countless choruses referring to the present reign of God's Kingdom, God's Army marching through the land, His chosen Overcomers, and other significant Sonship images are being sung weekly by multitudes of Christians.

One of the greatest sources of this expression is found in the music produced by the Vineyard fellowships. Wimber's background as an accomplished musician played an important role in assuring that music and worship became a vital part of the Vineyard's philosophy of ministry/worship. It was not long until talented musicians and writers were regularly turning out new choruses and worship songs. The Vineyard quickly established their own base for recording and producing worship cassettes and CD's, and were soon mailing them to churches all over America and into many parts of the world. It is no stretch or speculation to say that "Vineyard Music" has become the mainstay of a significant number of charismatic and evangelical worship services. These songs were usually designed or developed to help cultivate a close, intimate worship experience for the believer. But many of the songs could not help but to be linked to the Vineyard's theological structure and functioned as a powerful voice for promoting their vision of Kingdom Now.

Another example is found in the Hillsong Church, the fastest growing church in Australia. Hillsong claims 17,500 members. Founded by Brian and Bobbie Houston in 1983, this congregation has grown from 45 members meeting in a rented school room to its present status as a mega-church, exerting influence on a worldwide scale. Due to its large congregation, the Hillsong Church has attracted support from high-profile politicians. Current Australian Prime Minister John Howard opened its Baulkman Hills campus, and Australia's Treasurer, Peter Costello, whose brother attends Hillsong, spoke

at its annual conference in July 2004 (attended by 25,000 people). At the heart of Hillsong is its worship music. Hillsong was originally called Hills Christian Life Center. From its inception, its music ministry, which was called Hillsong, was eagerly embraced by a large segment of the Christian community, and that ever growing arm of the church soon found itself playing such a vital role in the church's life, that the decision was made to change the name of the church to Hillsong in the late 1990s.

Strongly rooted in the Word of Faith Movement, its Mission Statement simply states that "Hillsong exists to reach and influence the world by building a large Bible based church, changing mindsets and empowering people to lead and impact every sphere of life."⁷ Hillsong music is a vital component of that ministry, and it is seen as an integral part of the church's vision by enabling people to enter an atmosphere of worship and by providing resources that will help churches break into new dimensions of knowing God. Their music is seen as not only a means of empowering people, but a way to instruct and lead through praise and worship. For Hillsong, worship music is in every respect, as crucial for declaring its message as the preached Word. Hillsong Music is at the forefront of Christian Music throughout the world, with the live praise and worship albums now achieving gold status sales within only weeks from the date of release. According to Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, "The worship music from Hillsong has not only had a powerful effect on my life, but it has touched our whole congregation at Willow Creek. What a gift to the Christian community worldwide."

As with the Vineyard Movement, Hillsong's musical ministry, led by Worship Pastor Darlene Zschech, (author of one of the most popular praise choruses, *Shout to the Lord*)

⁷The Church's mission statement appears on www.Hillsong.com. (accessed on June 13, 2005).

reflects much of the church's Word of Faith theological base. Themes such as turning the nations to God, experiencing the Kingdom now, leading an overcoming life, and Dominion Theology, can be heard throughout much of its music. Given Hillsong's influence within the global church community, it represents another example of how the seeds of Sonship are constantly finding new soil in which to take root.

Like the testimonial recorded in Exodus 1:12, regarding the intense persecution and affliction heaped upon the ancient Israelites, "that the more they (the Egyptians) afflicted them (the Israelites), the more they multiplied and grew," Sonship seems to enjoy that same kind of incredible resilience. Over fifty years ago, great efforts were employed in order to subdue it and what many saw as its damaging influence upon the Christian community. Through sermons, printed material, and the use of any available forms of communication that those times offered, it was maligned and its adherents, especially the ministries that openly identified with it, were vilified. The 21st century has not seen much of a let up in terms of the persecution and "theological warnings" that this message continues to generate. However, its concepts and scope of influence have leaped every obstacle and barrier and regularly circle the globe and find its way into the midst of countless Christian groups. Instead of the message being hindered or limited, it now flows from leading voices of modern day Pentecostalism. Powerful Christian personalities who pastor the modern phenomenon called the mega-church serve to daily keep the fires of Sonship burning. Large Christian fellowships, such as the Vineyard, and Word of Faith [these groups are growing to the point when they assume "denominational" status] represent a powerful base of operation that assure that the seeds of this message will continue to be passed from generation to generation.

An unprecedented explosion within the world of new communications technologies will constantly open up new vistas for the advent of Sonship doctrine. And the message of Sonship has found a home within the praise and worship choruses and songs that are the mainstay of the majority of early 21st century Pentecostal worship. Rooted deep within the heart and soul of these churches' worship experience is the communication, though perhaps subtle at times, of Sonship creeds.

G.C. McCurry, one of the early prophetic and apostolic voices of Sonship, when looking back on the Movement after 45 years of involvement with it, said, "Well, they said it would simply blow over, and they were right! It's blown all over the world."⁸ There are grains of truth in McCurry's statement. The Sonship Movement, given the inroads that it has carved out within the ranks of Pentecostalism, promises to not only remain as a viable force, but its prognosis is one of continued growth and influence.

⁸G.C. McCurry, *Spiritual Growth Denotes Change After Change After Change* (Berkeley Springs, West Virginia: World Outreach Press, 1972), p. 54.

CHAPTER IX

WHY SONSHIP IDEAS FIND FERTILE GROUND

A common theme that was central to the New Order of the Latter Rain, and that also became a driving force within Sonship, is the “new thing” concept. That, in simple terms, means that God is always doing a new thing within the earth and His church. The revelation and truths of God are seen as constantly evolving. During the interview with Otis Winters, this writer asked him to define Sonship. In other words, if a believer were to approach and ask him what the “Move of God” was all about, how would he answer? His response was that Sonship, or the Move of God, is a going on to greater things. For Otis, this is clearly recognizable throughout all of scripture. He readily sees realms or levels being offered by the Spirit that go beyond Pentecost.¹

A popular writer and Bible teacher among Sonship followers is George Warnock. At one time an associate of William Branham’s healing ministry, Warnock was touched by the Latter Rain Movement through his association with the Sharon Bible College in Canada where the Movement began. In 1951, he wrote a provocative book, *The Feast of Tabernacles*. Its “revelation” that the Rapture message, as presented by the majority of churches, was a fallacy touched off a considerable controversy, but the main emphasis of the book is that the three great feasts of Israel, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, are related to experiences or realms of the Spirit to which believers can attain.² For example, he relates Passover as being fulfilled in Christ’s death (salvation); Pentecost was fulfilled by the outpouring of the Spirit (Pentecostal experience); and Tabernacles, which

¹Otis Winters interview, 15 February 2006.

²George Warnock, *Feast of Tabernacles* (Canada: Self Published, 1951), p. 34.

Warnock maintains is yet to be fulfilled.³ His book was a call to look beyond just “being Pentecostal” to moving on to the greater purposes of God.

Fifty four years later, another book has emerged with a similar call. George Barna, who many Christians will immediately identify as the founder [and Directing Leader] of *The Barna Group*, a research and resource firm, has written a book entitled, *Revolution*. Barna maintains that there is an incredible reshaping and revamping of the way Christians are now finding fulfillment in their spiritual journeys. Barna makes some bold statements, even suggesting that the local church is increasingly shrinking for many as the main source of spiritual nourishment, direction, and service.⁴ Barna sees a number of factors for this radical turn of events, but at the heart of it all are a people that he describes as seeking and longing for a deeper, more intimate, and greater reality in their relationship with Jesus Christ. He writes,

The United States is home to an increasing number of Revolutionaries. These people are devout followers of Jesus Christ who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshipping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ. Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many of them are not. The key to understanding Revolutionaries is not what church they attend, or even if they attend. Instead, it's their complete dedication to being thoroughly Christian by viewing every moment of life through a spiritual lens and making every decision in light of biblical principles. These are individuals who are determined to glorify God every day through every thought, word, and deed in their lives. This book is about the new breed of Christian Revolutionaries emerging in America and the spiritual Revolution they are bringing with them.⁵

It is said with assurance that Barna was not specifically talking about adherents to the Sonship message, though his analysis of what is happening within American Christianity

³Gordon J. Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, “The Latter Rain Movement” (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1996), p. 532.

⁴George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), p. 30.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 8.

certainly would include many of them. However, what he has written could easily be a statement of faith for the majority of Sonship believers. From the pen of the man who diligently tries to keep his hand on the pulse of America's Christian movements and trends, we are told that there are an increasingly growing number of believers that are seeking greater things in God. He further writes,

Revolutionaries are Christ-followers who refuse to make excuses for their failings; instead, they address and overcome those inadequacies. Jesus did not die on the cross to fill church auditoriums, to enable magnificent church campuses to be funded, or to motivate people to implement innovative programs. He died because He loves you and me, He wants an everlasting relationship with us, and He expects that connection to be so all consuming that we become wholly transformed—Jesus clones, if you will indulge the expression.⁶

That is language that would bring a rousing “amen” from the lips of nearly every Sonship adherent, especially the parts about “overcoming,” “being wholly transformed,” and “Jesus clones.” What Barna has discovered is more than just a people getting serious about their faith, but what he has tapped into, and which his book projects, is what has always been the appealing nature of Sonship. It offers the promise and possibilities of a stronger and richer Christian life. It provides a challenge. In short, it furnishes answers and points the way for those, especially within the ranks of Pentecostalism, who are seeking to grow deeper in their Christian walk. It issues a summons that there are, for the taking, greater heights and more attractive vistas of the Spirit. Herrick Holt, who was one of the early proponents of the Latter Rain Movement at Sharon Bible School in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, consistently preached from Isaiah 43:19, declaring that God was going to do a new thing. This idea of the new thing was also a popular phrase among the Charismatic Movement, and it continues to be a rallying cry among many in modern

⁶Barna, p. 26.

Pentecostalism who are seeking what they perceive are the greater things of God. There can be innate problems within every structure of the Christian church. Many are those who cherish the conservative nature of Fundamentalism, for example, but if not careful can become entrenched in a legalism that not only stifles Christian love and tolerance, but also wanders outside the bounds of scripture. Churches or religious movements that root themselves in the Reformation as their roots have left off being a vibrant witness for Christ and have gravitated into a social gospel mode that bears little resemblance to its roots. And in extreme cases, it has gravitated towards a movement known as Liberation Theology that can be so extreme it actually justifies armed resistance in order to affect changes to what it perceives as an oppressive society.⁷ The concept and promise of new things from God, integrated with the inherent propensity within Pentecostalism to constantly be seeking new and fresh experiences, becomes a powerful blend that makes Sonship an alluring option. When The Latter Rain Movement first came forth with the message of God bringing a new thing to his church, a firestorm of resistance and controversy was ignited. But today, multitudes are seeking it.

A good example of this is the testimony of Noah Horst. Noah was a leading elder in one of the first Refuge Communities founded by the Sam Fife Movement in North America.⁸ Noah relates how he was raised in the Mennonite tradition. Though he says that that part of his spiritual journey was necessary, he described that he always sensed that something was missing from his Christian walk. When he came into contact with the Charismatic movement through the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, he readily embraced what he saw as a new realm of the Spirit that offered new and fresh

⁷Gustavo, Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), p. 172.

⁸This community is still located in Naples, Florida. Noah Horst passed away on October 11, 2006.

possibilities. He served within this movement for a number of years, hopeful that he could help spread the Charismatic message among fellow Mennonites. During his journey within the Charismatic movement, he testifies that various ministries touched his life with the challenge that there was even more to experience beyond one's own personal Pentecost. Among these ministries that influenced Noah's spiritual journey, Gerald Derstine's played a major role. In Noah's words, when he saw the message of Sonship, "it was the fulfillment of all he had been searching for. The message of Sonship offered answers that he'd been searching for."⁹

Noah's account is echoed in countless others who relate, that out of a spiritual unrest or a personal odyssey in search of deeper, spiritual truth, they claim to have found what they were searching for within the teachings of Sonship. Given Barna's influential book with reports of spiritual discontent reaching epidemic proportions within America, the seeds of Sonship will continue to find fertile ground, and its message will become more attractive to a generation more open to the idea of pursuing spirituality outside the boundaries of the traditional church structure.

Pat Robertson came to embrace a Dominion Theology, which is another name for Sonship teaching, out of an overwhelming feeling that our nation/world had drifted so far from a sound moral compass and had become engulfed in an evil influence that, if not restrained and overturned, would mean the doom of all humankind.¹⁰ There are many who have much in common with Robertson's feelings of apprehension and despair. Herein lies another reason why Sonship finds "good ground." As the world grows more violent, and as lawlessness, famine, disasters, and fears of terrorism, continue to sweep

⁹Telephone interview with Noah Horst, 17 July 2006.

¹⁰ Pat Robertson & Bob Slosser, *The Secret Kingdom: A Promise of Hope and Freedom in a World of Turmoil*(Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), Introduction.

the globe, humankind, weary with the daily bombardment of pessimistic news and reports, more and more finds itself defenseless and frustrated in the face of innumerable dilemmas, and not many answers being offered.

At the heart and soul of the Sonship message are the promise and notion that this world order will be changed for the better. Sonship paints a picture of evil eventually being conquered and banished by God's sons or "end time Army" that can be quite seductive and attractive to many whose hearts are gripped with uncertainty and doubt. With Sonship, there is no ambiguity. God has not been caught off guard by what is happening. The powers of evil will run their course, but God is busy preparing the way out, and it will soon appear on the stage of history in the form of a body of sons who, with the same ministry that Jesus demonstrated, put down all works of darkness and disobedience, ushering in God's Kingdom, which will reign over all forever. It is a message that many like to hear. And it is a message that many want to believe. Like the "health and wealth" gospel that vast multitudes have welcomed, Sonship, in many ways, offers the promise of spiritual security and a bright hope for the future.

Another reason that Sonship finds fertile ground is because Sonship, despite being impossible for many to accept, offers a number of things that multitudes within the church are seeking a deeper spirituality, a more intimate worship experience, and a genuine understanding and practice of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Barna describes the shift within the American church from solely looking to the church for one's spiritual food, encouragement, fellowship, and guidance. He identifies a group of people, whose numbers are growing every day, who are seeking for and discovering a greater spiritual experience and connection with God outside the bounds of

the organized church. For Barna, these “Revolutionaries”¹¹ are like millions in our culture who have discovered only failing moral standards, material excess, dysfunctional relationships, political chaos, and often a lukewarm church that also could not provide many answers. But unlike millions in our culture who have found themselves in this morass, Revolutionaries have made a decision to live in concert with core biblical principles, and more often than not, that means that they are seeking and finding outside the church. This, of course, creates a tension between Revolutionaries and the established church order, but Revolutionaries will not be derailed from their purpose of finding a genuine, fulfilling, and satisfying faith experience. This is fertile ground for Sonship’s message, for it promises all that and more.

Barna identifies Revolutionaries as having seven specific passions. These, according to Barna, were seven passions evident within the early church. He lists them as: Intimate Worship, Faith Based Conversation, Intentional Spiritual Growth, Servanthood, Resource Investment, Spiritual Friendships, and Family Faith.¹² All of these passions for the faith that many are seeking have always been central to Sonship’s pleas. In a culture where church services are all too often merely gatherings of the faithful with no real presence of God, or an endless list of “churchy” programs that usually bear no fruit, Sonship’s call to the “serious” pursuit of one’s faith can seem appealing to those who are trying to find a deeper spiritual reality.

Sonship’s offer of intimate worship is one of the most appealing aspects that tend to draw people its way. With the advent of the Jesus Movement in the late 1960s, contemporary Christian music began to make its appearance within the church. Since

¹¹George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale Publishing Co, 2005), p. 12

¹² Ibid., p. 22.

then, there has been an unprecedented explosion and revolution of new and different modes of Christian music that forms the basis of many church's worship format. Much of that has come about in the church's efforts to offer, not only music that would appeal to the youth, but provide a means whereby a believer could encounter a greater worship experience. However, much of this has gravitated into a routine, even formal type of approach. Nearly twenty years before the onslaught of today's contemporary music, one of the main foundations of Sonship ministry was lively, spiritually oriented worship. At first, many of the well known revival choruses were used, but quickly following that was the implementation of singing Bible verses, especially the Psalms. Sonship worship services could run for hours. For those who are part of the present day Sonship movements, worship is still important, and it is taught by them as a way of life, not something to just be employed during church time. Hence, Sonship offers spirituality and a life of the Spirit for which many in our day are seeking.

Sonship has always offered another element of faith for which many are seeking, and that is the call to serious discipleship. The biblical hallmarks of a true disciple of Christ are clear. It calls for a lifestyle that is irrefutable evidence of one's complete devotion to Christ. Underscore the word "complete." In an age where compromise is an operative word, and in a culture where everyone seems to be so busy, often too busy for spiritual pursuits, and within an environment that constantly stresses "I" and "me," many Christians find their lives being torn in so many directions that their priorities become skewed, their allegiance to God becomes distorted. But those who sense the need for change, and begin to seek a more disciplined commitment are finding it harder to find spiritual direction. On the other hand, Sonship's strong message of discipleship, taking

up the cross, dying to self, and emulating the life of Jesus is finding fertile ground in many hearts these days.

It is not too stark of a statement that given the spiritual climate of these days, the lukewarmness of many churches, and the failure of many Christians to be challenged to walk as Christ did, has created a spiritual environment where Sonship's seeds will not only be welcomed, but will continue to develop.

CHAPTER X

CRITIQUE OF THE SONSHIP MESSAGE

The teaching of Sonship ignited a storm of controversy that has only intensified over the several decades since its inception. Born within the controversial Latter Rain Movement, it has ploughed through years of turmoil and persecution to become firmly rooted within many areas of America's churches. Through popular and influential ministries/churches, Christian televangelists, contemporary worship music, and a host of other ways, it continues to leave its imprint and garner faithful followers. As this spiritual force continues to carve its path across American Christendom, the friction remains enormous, and the opposition is unrelenting, as many see harmful and spiritually perilous trends within its concepts.

Because Sonship teachings are so vast and so interwoven through scripture, often in multifaceted and intricate ways, it is impossible to list all the "problem areas," with which many Bible teachers, scholars, and theologians take umbrage. However, some Sonship tenets seem to provoke stronger debates among the majority of Sonship critics. These teachings would be Sonship's view of Christ's second coming, the concept of Dominionism (Kingdom Triumphalism), its ideas on the five fold ministry, and the way Sonship recognizes the nature of humankind.

One of the doctrines that lies at the heart of Sonship teaching is that Jesus will return again after the tribulation. In fact, it is safe to say that the concept of Sonship¹ hinges on this one perceived truth. If Jesus returns before the Tribulation, and if he can come at anytime, as many of the Fundamental, Evangelical, and Charismatic churches maintain,

¹A reminder that the term Sonship, as used within this thesis, can be interchanged with terms such as "Move of God," "Manifested Sons of God," and "Dominionism."

then Sonship's overall message would collapse like the proverbial house of cards. For Sonship proponents, the rapture of the church, as traditionally taught, simply could never fit into what God has purposed or designed for His church. Not everyone who holds a "Post Tribulation"² view of Christ's second coming is "tainted" by the influence of Sonship. There are many Evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal Christians who are re-examining their understandings of Christ's second coming, and some are altering their eschatological views. Hence, criticism of Sonship's Eschatology is not based merely on the fact that it dismisses the "Rapture message," but that it moves into areas of biblical interpretation that are, in the view of the critics, gross error. An example of this can be found in the writings of Earl Paulk regarding his understanding of the Second Coming. Paulk writes,

In Matthew 24:14, Jesus clearly says that He cannot return for His Bride until she has demonstrated the Gospel of the Kingdom to all the nations of the earth. Until the church can demonstrate the alternative Kingdom, Jesus cannot come again. God no longer has the authority to send Christ back to earth, because He will not circumvent His eternal plan. While no man knows the day or the hour, I can say with the authority of God that Christ will not and cannot come back until we have demonstrated the Gospel of the Kingdom to the nations of the earth. That task demands a mature church, which will have become an alternative to the kingdom of the world. That is what the church is all about and Jesus Christ's return is up to us.³

Paulk's premise rests on the Latter Rain's reading of Acts 3:21 which states:

Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.⁴

While it is true that scripture maintains that some things need to transpire before Christ's return, Paulk's expectations and views of what the church must do in order that the

²The view that Christ will return for his saints after the Tribulation.

³Earl Paulk, *The Great Escape Theory* (Atlanta: K Dimension Publishers, [n.d.]), p. 14

⁴Acts 3:21 KJV (King James Version).

Second Coming can happen are seen by many as spurious. In an article from “The Christian Research Journal,” Robert M. Bowman critiques Paulk’s Acts 3: 21 interpretation. He writes,

With his inflated view of man and the church, it will be no surprise that Paulk expects a great deal from the church. The point being made by Peter in Acts 3:21 is not that the church must restore all things before Christ can return, but rather that Christ will not return until it is the Father’s time for Christ to bring about restoration of all things.⁵

Paulk’s view is quite consistent with many of the Sonship teachers. Sonship boldly links what they see as God’s purposes for his end-time church with Christ’s return. While the majority of American Christians clearly leave the return of Christ exclusively within God’s hands and will, Sonship, on the other hand, places much of the responsibility upon God’s chosen to reach that level of maturity that will “allow” God to move onward with his eternal purposes. Sonship’s scriptural interpretation surrounding the Second Advent gets even trickier when one takes into account that within the ranks of Sonship there is a stream of thought that relegates Christ return to “returning in His chosen.” Paulk comes close to this stance in his views, and this was, indeed, the view of Sam Fife, one of the founding fathers of the movement.

The views of Bill Britton, who before his death was one of the leading voices within Sonship, represent the other stream of thinking within Sonship regarding Christ’s return. He, like his Sonship colleagues, does not accept the traditional dispensational teaching of a pre-tribulation Rapture. However, he does still hold to a visible, literal return of Christ. He writes,

What really happens is that Jesus is coming back with a sound of a trumpet. Now wherever the Bible speaks of a trumpet, it is symbolic of a message

⁵Robert M. Bowman, Jr., with Craig S Hawkins and Dan R.Schlesinger, “The Gospel According to Paulk: A Critique of “Kingdom Theology,” *The Christian Research Journal*, 11:1 (Summer 1988), p. 15.

going forth. Look it up. Trumpets sounded each feast day. And there is a message or trumpet of restoration that brings Jesus back to earth. And when he comes back, those saints that come back with him shall receive their bodies again that were laid down in death. Those bodies shall ascend or rise out of that state of death, into a glorious state of likeness to His body of glory. Those who are still dwelling in these mortal bodies shall be “caught up” into that same place. This mortal shall put on immortality. Death shall be swallowed up in victory. Then the Sons of God, the Manchild Company, shall be “caught up unto God, and to His throne.” The manifestation of the Sons of God takes place. The Jubilee trumpet of Leviticus 25 begins to sound. The Melchisedec priesthood order passes through the veil into the Holy of Holies to be with their great High Priest, Jesus our Lord. Those whom he has made to be kings and priests begin to reign on this earth. The Armies of heaven who follow Jesus on white horses, destroy Babylon, burn her with fire, and bind Satan with unbreakable chain. All enemies begin to be put under the feet of The Body of Christ, until every enemy has been destroyed, even death. Whether or not you have faith to believe for these great things does not bother me in the least. For the performance of these things God has spoken does not depend on your faith, and is not hindered by your unbelief. He has spoken and he shall perform it. The age of sin and death, sickness, crime, hate, war, pain, darkness, and rebellion is rapidly coming to an end. The door is opening to a new age. The Kingdom is getting ready to come to earth. Jesus is coming soon!⁶

Britton’s commentary on Christ’s return shows how complex and intricate the teaching of Sonship can become. It also reveals how this particular stream, though still vastly different from mainstream Christianity, embraces a bodily return of Christ and sees it as a necessary event in order for God’s plan to come to fruition. Britton is willing to admit that there is always a certain element of speculation involved in comprehending these truths. For Britton and others in this movement, the revelation is continuously unfolding, and they are quick to alter the picture as study of the prophetic becomes clearer. Britton, unlike some within the movement, is quick to point out that he does not have it all figured out. The Sonship message is a progressive revelation as prophets and teachers, who are “looking through a glass darkly,” seek to put the fragmented pieces together.⁷ This

⁶Bill Britton, *A Closer Look at the Rapture*, (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, [n.d.]), p.65.

⁷David Graham, *The Doctrine of Sonship: A Theological Investigation*, (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press 1985), p.8.

speculating and the piecing of the fragments together is precisely what troubles many of those who struggle with and outright oppose Sonship's teachings. Sonship's heavy reliance on "types and shadows," within scripture also invites criticism. Sonship teachers take liberties in assigning profound meanings to biblical types within scripture that at best can be subjective in their interpretative authority.

It is this flawed biblical interpretation that opponents point to that enables the teachers of Sonship to develop the segment of their teaching that has come to be called Dominion Theology. In their essence, Dominion Theology, or Kingdom Now teachings, foresee the day when God will work through his chosen sons or Overcomers, who have been brought to full spiritual maturity, and make a way into the institutions and systems of this world and eventually usher in God's authority and rulership. Their hope and conviction are that God's mighty end-time army of believers will set things right.

As with the Sonship movement's views of the second coming of Christ, it is not solely the fact that Sonship embraces a post-millennial position that draws criticism, but what many see as its careless handling of scripture. The promise of an earthly dominance in which the redeemed will eventually rule has biblical roots, but that reign is not the product of an elect corps of saints taking over the institutions of this world. It is hard to marry Sonship's concept of dominion with Scripture when there appears to be no clear-cut command from Christ to seek or achieve worldwide dominion before his return. It would appear that that responsibility and task are in God's hands, and will be accomplished by God in his time.

One of the main concepts that the Latter Rain Movement fostered, and which became part of Sonship thought, was the rebirthing or re-establishing of the offices of the Apostle

and Prophet. This concept is also known as the restoration of the “fivefold ministry.” According to this doctrine, the five offices or ministries listed in Ephesians 4:11, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are all needed in their fullness for the Body of Christ to properly function and to go on to perfection and maturity. It only stands to reason, therefore, that the church needs to start recognizing those with these specific callings, especially apostles and prophets.

The debate over this subject usually finds its starting point with the question as to whether there are still apostles and prophets, and exactly what are their functions in today’s church, if they do, indeed, still survive. For some, the office of prophet and apostle passed away in the first century. Many hold this belief about the gifts of the Spirit as well, especially the gift of speaking in other tongues.⁸ There are those who do not have a problem accepting the fact that the ministry of prophet and apostle is still alive. There are various views of what they do, ranging from seeing them as church planters and especially gifted preachers to those whose word and judgment should not be questioned. It is the latter view that causes consternation among many church leaders.

Quite often within the Sonship movement, spiritual authority can be emphasized to such an extreme, that one is discouraged from questioning the decisions or teachings of its leaders. “Submission” is a word frequently used, and depending on the group or leader, the level of submission will vary. In some cases, it is carried to excess, where

⁸www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cessationism. Classical cessationists assert that the miraculous gifts such as prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues ceased with the apostles and only served as launching pads for the spreading of the Gospel. However, these cessationists do believe that God still occasionally does miracle-like activities today, such as healings or divine guidance, so long as these “miracles” do not accredit new doctrine or add to the New Testament canon (Warfield, Gaffin). John MacArthur is perhaps the best known classical cessationist.

individuals have found areas of their lives being administered by church leaders that should be reserved for the believer and his immediate family.

Sonship's acceptance of the restoration of all the ministry gifts, its unorthodox belief system surrounding Christ's second coming, and its emphasis on the church's role in restoring the nations and world order back to God make it a magnet for controversy. Its view of the nature of humankind also creates its share of theological scrutiny.

If some of the foremost teachers from the Sonship Movement were to sit down and compose a mission statement, one of the main goals would be for the chosen believer to come into the image of Christ, to the full stature of the Son of God. In his book, *Destined For The Throne*, Paul Billheimer speaks to this subject by writing,

The redeemed is an extension of the Godhead. Here is a completely new, unique, and exclusive order of beings which may be called a "new species." there is nothing like it in all the kingdoms of infinity. This is the order of beings which God envisioned when He spoke the worlds into being. This is the order of being which Paul called "the new man" (Eph. 2:15), the "new humanity" destined through the new birth to be the aristocracy of the universe. They form a new and exclusive royalty, a new ruling hierarchy who will also constitute the Bride, the Lamb's wife. This order is divinely designated to be co-ruler, co-sovereign, co-administrator and a judicially equal partner to the throne by virtue of redemption and wedlock with the King of kings.⁹

From Sonship's point of view, Adam, hence, humankind, was created so much in the image and likeness of God that he was to be equal with God in all things. When Adam fell in the garden, that was lost, but Jesus came to win that place back for those whom God has chosen for that calling. This doctrinal position has been called the "ye are gods" heresy, a term taken from Psalm 82:6 where it is recorded in the King James Version: *I*

⁹Paul E. Billheimer, *Destined For The Throne* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 35-36.

have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. It is also a reference to which Jesus refers in John 10:34.

Ken Copeland, a leading voice within modern day Pentecostalism, and whose ministry influence is felt around the world, writes on this subject:

If you stood Adam beside God, they look just exactly alike. If you stood Jesus and Adam side by side, they would act and sound exactly alike. The Image is that they look just alike, but the likeness is that they act alike and they are alike. All of God's attributes, all of God's authority, all of God's faith, all of God's ability was invested in man.¹⁰

Copeland even takes this further in his teaching entitled "The Force of Love" when he says:

Adam was not a little like God, not almost like God, and you don't have a God in you. You are one.¹¹

Copeland and Billheimer's analysis of humankind's position in creation, which is the acknowledged outlook within the greater part of Sonship groups, make it easy to see why this kind of teaching generates huge waves of disagreement.

Born in the fires of the Latter Rain controversies, Sonship will always be an object of suspicion, criticism, open hostility, and outright censure from pastors, religious leaders, and Christian apologists. Its method of biblical interpretation will always put it at odds with the bulk of mainstream Christianity, as its reliance upon revelatory truth and knowledge place it, in many opinions, squarely within the realm of Gnosticism and esotericism. An example of this is a statement by Paul Grubb, one of the main ministries that contributed much to the Sonship movement. Grubb states:

¹⁰Kenneth Copeland, "Authority of the Believer IV" (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1987, audiotape # 01-0304), side 1.

¹¹Kenneth Copeland, "The Force of Love" (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1987, audiotape # 02-0028), side 1.

How marvelous is the prospect of the blessings of this new fellowship, an illumination or revelation, sealing of God to Sonship, and a perfection or initiation into the mysteries that the rest of Christendom knows nothing about.¹²

Grubb's views represent a significant portion of the Sonship stream of thought.

However, Bill Britton not only represents another major figure within Sonship's involvement, but his teachings also represent another stream of thought within Sonship. It should be noted that Britton's writings were certainly controversial. It should also be pointed out that Britton himself readily admitted that his message and understanding of Sonship were still unfolding, and that he did not possess all the answers. And yet, when one reads his writings, he gets the sense that much of the arrogance and attitudes of superiority are not there. One of the criticisms of those who are pursuing Sonship is that they are a prideful group of spiritual elitists who revel in a knowledge that they feel others do not possess. This is never the case with Britton. I first encountered Britton's writings in 1974, just as I was beginning my ministry. Two years later I met him for the first time when he stopped at a little church I was pastoring in Pennsylvania to minister. Years later, he held services in my church in Southern California. Shortly after he closed his services with us in Southern California, he suffered a stroke and died several days later in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Long Beach, California. I was there when he died. Bill was a humble servant of God, always ready to help young ministries get a start. Though he was much in demand as a speaker and teacher at many deeper life conferences and traveled the world in ministry, he lived and operated his ministry by faith, never setting a fee for his ministry, and no place was too small for him to visit. By virtue of his teachings, he was always a target for personal attacks, often by those who

¹²Paul Grubb, *Manifested Sonship*, (Memphis: Paul Grubb Press, [n.d.]) p. 20.

had never met him. I never heard him utter a negative thing about any of his attackers.

Bill's life stands as a testimony of one who tried to truly walk and live as Christ did.

Britton's writings always attempted to remain Christ centered, always giving him the preeminence, and presented the message of the cross as fundamental to the idea of Sonship. Most of Britton's ideas are based on solid hermeneutical principles. There always has been, and no doubt, always will be uneasiness between traditional or established biblical interpretations and those who put forward new insights. There is no question that within the teachings of Sonship, there is much that, after careful biblical scrutiny, needs to be avoided. However, at the other end of the spectrum there are men and women like Britton who warrant more unbiased assessment than they have received. The church certainly needs to guard against heresy and excess, but never at the expense of being closed to possibilities simply because something seems new and different.

In relating some thoughts regarding Britton's life and ministry, there is an important concept underscored that needs to be considered when formulating a critique of the Sonship movement and its teachings. Many who take an opposing stance against Sonship tend to lump everyone into the movement simply because their ministry or message reflects some of its views. When one scans some of the web pages of those authors who perceive certain ministries as being firmly within the camp of Sonship, he can find the names of Benny Hinn, Rod Parsley, Ken Copeland, and Kenneth Hagin, to name a few. However, these men would never have been seen by most of the founding fathers of Sonship as possessing the true picture of Sonship. As has been mentioned, Sam Fife's ministry was one of the catalysts for launching and establishing Sonship truths. Though I never met Reverend Fife or had a relationship with him as I did other leaders of the

movement, I read many of his pamphlets, met and fellowshiped with countless brothers and sisters who were part of that movement, met some of the prominent elders, and have personally ministered at three of the farm fellowships who, at the time, were rooted in his teachings and vision. The showmanship, self promotion, fund raising techniques, and the orchestrated environment within which many prominent ministries operate would have been anathema to the spirit and message of Sonship. Britton would have been quick to point out that true Sonship is not about building bigger and more prominent ministries, or to ever seek popularity or prestige. Kelley Varner, one of the present foremost voices of the Sonship movement sums it up when he said:

In this ministry, who we are in Christ is more important than what we do. The fruit of His divine nature (Gal 5:22-23; 2 Pet 1:4) is more important than our charismatic giftings (Rom 12:1-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10). The purpose of God is to conform us to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), and the high calling of God (Phil 3:12-14) is to Become a people just like Jesus, brothers in whom he is not ashamed (Heb 2:6-13).¹³

For Fife, Britton, G.C. McCurry, Doc Agin, and other early Sonship pioneers, much of modern day Pentecostalism would be seen as “Babylon.”¹⁴

What Hinn, Parsley, Copeland, Hagin, and others do exhibit, however, is the fact that their respective ministries have been germinated with the seeds of Sonship. What the critics detect, and they are correct in this observation, is that many of the prominent Pentecostal ministries are saying some things that unmistakably can be traced back to the Latter Rain Movement and the emergence of Sonship. But the critique goes too far when it starts identifying these ministries as genuine spokespersons of the Sonship movement.

¹³ Varner, Kelly. *Philosophy of Ministry*. <http://www.kellyvarner.org>. (accessed October 17, 2005).

¹⁴ Babylon is a term used among Sonship teachers and the movement to designate religious movements or expressions that are, from their view, centered more on human ways and thinking than on the Holy Spirit's.

CHAPTER XI

SONSHIP WILL CONTINUE

Earlier in this thesis, this work quoted the Reverend G.C. McCurry, who was describing how many had predicted the doom of Sonship. He related that he remembered one person saying that “it will soon blow over.” McCurry picked up on that and said that it surely did, “it has blown all over the world.”¹ That statement was made over thirty years ago. Since that time, Sonship surely has blown all over the world. From the pulpits of some of the largest churches and ministries in North America, as well as from some of the world’s most powerful television and radio transmitters, the seeds of Sonship are constantly disseminated. Its message has become such an integral part of modern Pentecostalism that there is no foreseeable way that its influence will ever wane.

As has been stated several times before, the teaching of Sonship emerged from the Latter Rain Movement that was born in the fires of adversity. It is not startling that the Sonship Movement would also be inextricably yoked with persecution and malevolence. It will always be that way for this message, as well as for those who follow its path and proclaim it. There has always been a difficult price to pay for being identified with this movement. Pastors have lost their churches, been stripped of their ministerial credentials, and men and women have been ostracized by their Christian brothers and sisters, and have seen their ministries attacked in many ways. These are just a few of the things that some have had to endure for adherence to Sonship. Despite all of this, the number of devotees is not dwindling, but their numbers are on the rise every year.

¹G.C. McCurry, *Spiritual Growth Denotes Change after Change*, (Berkeley Springs, West Virginia: World Outreach Press, 1972) p. 25.

According to Vinson Synan, a majority of the fifty or so mega-churches, each with over fifty thousand members, are Pentecostal/charismatic/neo-charismatic.² Synan explains that along with these huge membership numbers, there is an abundance of wealth being made available for ongoing, worldwide Pentecostal renewal.³ Given the sheer size of these numbers regarding membership and finances, Pentecostal renewal and expansion will continue to be a powerful force for spreading the gospel for years to come. Synan remarks that as the “Century of the Holy Spirit” came to an end, there was every indication that the next thousand years could indeed be the “millennium of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ At the core of this spiritual explosion and embedded within many of its teachings will be the seeds of Sonship. The movement, which many wondered if it would ever survive, continues to reach the far corners of the world, and as we start through another century it seems certain that its influence will not diminish.

With every movement that continues to evolve, there comes a time when a “new breed” of leadership emerges that ultimately brings fresh ideas, new energy, and suggests changes to the status quo. And, as with any growth and change, there come the inevitable tensions and struggles. One of the current struggles within the Kingdom or Sonship movement is the acceptance or rejection of a body of teaching that has come to be called Ultimate Reconciliation. Loosely defined, Ultimate Reconciliationists believe there will come a time when the wicked, including the devil and his angels in some cases, will come out of torment and be reconciled to God. Like the teachings of Sonship, Ultimate Reconciliation can become quite involved and intricate when one attempts to trace its

²Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* (Nashville, Tennessee: Published by Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 384.

³Ibid, p.384.

⁴Ibid, p. 380.

concepts throughout scripture. Elwin R. Roach of Alamogordo, New Mexico and J. Preston Eby of El Paso, Texas are two of its main proponents. Eby relates a little regarding his journey to this theological position when he writes,

I was born into a Mennonite family in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. while still a toddler my parents received the baptism in the Holy Spirit through the witness of some Pentecostal brethren in the area. He was led of the Lord to sell their business and move to Alabama to do missionary work. In my twelfth year, I was filled with the Spirit, and in that same year the Holy Spirit sovereignty unfolded to my understanding the wonderful truth of reconciliation of all things and all men unto God. No one else around me, in family or church associations embraced this revelation. Through those early years I kept this truth in my heart and pondered it in my heart. Later I came in contact with, and was touched by, a mighty move of the Spirit known as the “Latter Rain”, with emphasis on the body of Christ, gifts of the Spirit, laying on of hands, impartation, five-fold ministry, prophetic ministry, spiritual worship, the kingdom of God, and going on to perfection, unto the fullness of Sonship to God. The Lord pressed me into a deeper walk with Him, intensifying within my heart the truths of Sonship and the kingdom of God, already planted as seed through the visitation of the Lord as Latter Rain.⁵

Eby regularly sends his teachings throughout America by way of audio recordings and his monthly mailing entitled “Kingdom Bible Studies.”

Roach’s testimony is similar. He started out in the Southern Baptist church. He testifies that he was, from the beginning, looking for all the Lord had to offer. He and his wife Margit received the Pentecostal experience of the infilling of the Holy Spirit in a Bible study not affiliated with the Southern Baptists. He shares that it was not long until the revelation of Sonship came along, and he began to see God’s ultimate plan and infinite grace to humanity. He relates trying to share these things, but soon found himself ostracized by the pastor, church leaders, and the Southern Baptist Convention. After

⁵ Eby, J. Preston. *Kingdom Bible Studies*. www.godfire.net/eby/statement.html (accessed December 30, 2006).

more and more restrictions were imposed, he and his wife left the denomination in peace.⁶

Like Eby, Roach's teachings reach into many parts of the nation, and a monthly publication entitled "The Pathfinder" has a large circulation, and is an instrument for carrying Ultimate Reconciliation ideas to many homes. Many of the "new breed" of Sonship teachers have also embraced this concept. Lynn Hiles, Kelley Varner, and Robert Torango are just a few who reside in this camp. The fact that there are a growing number of Sonship teachers who are moving into this stream may indicate that dynamic of always seeking for some new thing that is germane to Pentecostalism. Regardless of the motivation or reason for this doctrinal shift among some, this is an issue that will continue to challenge Sonship teachers in the coming years. It will also become a challenge to mainstream Christianity as these "new seeds" of Sonship teaching find their way into the ministries and message of scores of prominent, modern Pentecostal voices.

Sonship's time has come. Though few will openly sail beneath its banner, its message and emphasis abound within modern Pentecostalism. Sonship's time has come because of the great spiritual revolution that has overtaken us. Wherever you find people determined to find a greater spiritual focus and committed to letting nothing stand in their way on their journey to a more meaningful relationship with God, Sonship principles will thrive. As long as there are those willing to blaze new spiritual paths in order to discover a greater intimacy with God, Sonship will be an option. There is no question that Sonship will survive and, indeed, thrive. Perhaps a question that needs to be asked is how the local church will contend with a growing multitude of people who are spiritually

⁶Roach, Elwin. "The Pathfinder." (revised 2000), www.godfire.net/history.html, (accessed December 30, 2006).

dissatisfied and searching outside the church for a vital spiritual connection? One of the critiques of the Sonship movement is that its message emphasizes that the church has failed and is not doing enough. Sonship has declared that message for nearly fifty years, but today church observers like George Barna are quickly coming to the same conclusion.

One of the first things that need to be done is for the church to come to grips as to what is happening all around it. When the Latter Rain Movement started in the late 1940s, many churches opposed it, but most simply tried to ignore it. However, ignoring it never made it go away, and neither did fighting it. It would be a mistake for the church to ignore the spiritual hunger and thirst that abound within our present culture. The only reasonable position for the church to assume is to somehow extend to a spiritually starved generation a message of radical transformation and spiritual commitment. Sonship has done that for decades, and its seeds live on in countless ministries and movements, and it will continue to make its influence known. The church has nothing to lose and everything to gain by exploring new ways of “doing church.” Sonship was ahead of its time in this regard, as it always sought to avoid a stiff, formalistic approach to worship or service to God.

The key for the church to reverse its dwindling numbers, lack of zeal, and genuine discipleship is to discern how God is at work in this hour and to adjust in whatever ways are required to meet the need. In this, Sonship truths can be a help. For no matter what one’s personal views of Sonship’s diverse and controversial concepts, it has some valuable insights for a church world that desperately needs renewal. Sonship’s emphasis on serious discipleship, a present filling of God’s power, and a never ceasing challenge to discover God’s Word are central tenets of Sonship that could preach in nearly every Bible

believing church in our land. There are positions of strength which Sonship has to offer from which the church could benefit. Whether its principles of a more passionate worship, a call to a deeper spirituality, or the summons to being God's hand of ministry extended within the earth, there is much good that could be absorbed from Sonship's example.

Despite the difficulties facing the church, this is also an hour of opportunity. From its inception, Sonship taught that we are never called to just go to church; we are the church. You can hear that phrase quite frequently these days, but it is said so much that in many circles it is only a cliché. Many, however, saw the truth of what Sonship was saying, made the needed adjustments in their worship, evangelism, etc., and embraced renewal. As Vinson Synan pointed out, the 21st century will be another time of unparalleled Holy Spirit activity. It is, without a doubt, a time of hope and opportunity for the church.

All this hinges on adequate leadership. How a church will respond to the challenges of this hour depends first and foremost on its leadership. Sonship advocated this in the beginning, and its message and call for leaders to be open to the Spirit's leadership are needed more now than ever. Sonship proponents not only preached and taught it, but they strove to exemplify it in their services. As long as leaders remain fearful and defensive of "their turf," and overly protective of "their people," advancement in the Kingdom will be stifled. Bill Britton writes concerning leaders:

A shepherd does not have to be older, more educated, or more intellectual than those to whom he ministers. For he does not minister education or intellectualism. He ministers the divinely inspired Word of God. Therefore, he must be a leader in the things of the Spirit, and have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus that will be an inspiration to the people. He must be willing to have his personal life put on the cross, and be a living sacrifice for the sake of the Lord's Body. Certain personality traits or bad spirits (such as a quick temper, a sharp tongue, envy, jealousy,

partiality, or fear of man, etc), which are often excused in a young, immature Christian, can not be tolerated in him who is called to walk as a leader of God's people. It is a crucified walk, and humility is the watchword.⁷

Humility, indeed, is the watchword. It will take a humbleness to follow God's leadings as they invite change and new direction.

Sonship will continue because of the continued expansion of modern Pentecostalism, and the incessant call for spiritual renewal. As modern Pentecostal ministries and movements have grown and increased, they have, usually unwittingly, assimilated Sonship thought. Sonship ideas have provided a paradigm in the past upon which they could build, and as the current spiritual explosion continues to race around the globe, teachers and preachers will constantly be searching for scriptural motif and patterns with which to clarify their vision. Standing ready to help supply answers and to persistently challenge Pentecostalism to rise to new heights is the movement that emerged from the fires of the Latter Rain Movement nearly a half a century ago—Sonship.

⁷Bill Britton, *Shepherds: Submission, Discipleship, and Trans-local Authority* (Springfield, Missouri: Bill Britton Press, [n.d.]), p. 4.

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